



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

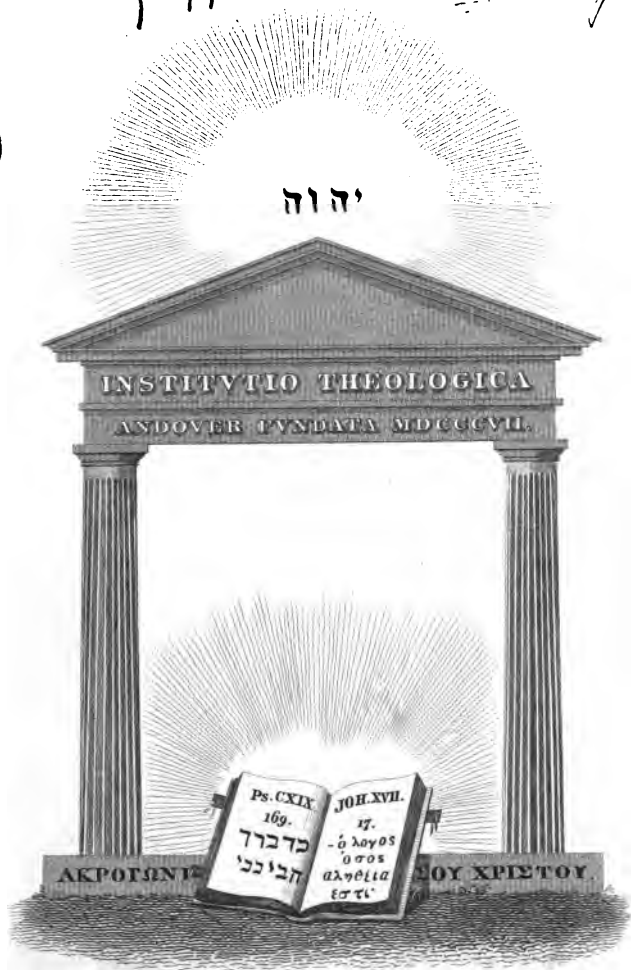
- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

Y 91

Browning







ROBERT BROWNING AS A
RELIGIOUS TEACHER.

**London: C. J. CLAY AND SONS,
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS WAREHOUSE,
AVE MARIA LANE.**

Glasgow: 50, WELLINGTON STREET.



**Leipzig: F. A. BROCKHAUS.
New York: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY.
Bombay: E. SEYMOUR HALE.**

[All Rights reserved]

ROBERT BBROWNING

AS A

RELIGIOUS TEACHER,

BEING THE

BBURNEY ESSAY

FOR 1900,

BY

ARTHUR CECIL PIGOU, B.A.

SCHOLAR OF KING'S COLLEGE.

LONDON:

C. J. CLAY AND SONS,

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS WAREHOUSE,
AVE MARIA LANE.

1901

C

Cambridge:
PRINTED BY J. AND C. F. CLAY,
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS.



52,046

TO MY MOTHER.

PREFACE.

THE following Essay secured the Burney Prize for the year 1900 at Cambridge University and is now published in compliance with the conditions of the Prize. While preparing it for the Press, I have introduced a number of changes in language and arrangement, especially in the discussion of Browning's theory of knowledge; have increased the length of the last two chapters by the addition of some new matter; and have been led, by the criticisms of friends and by further reflection, to modify my view of the poet's attitude towards Christianity and to rewrite the chapter dealing with that subject.

I have made no attempt to distinguish Browning's religion from his philosophy, but have interpreted the phrase 'religious teacher' in the widest possible sense. The main purpose of the Essay is to expound the views which he seems to have held upon various philosophical and theological problems in such a way

as to bring out the relations between them, and to unite them into some kind of a system. A complete discussion of the subject would, of course, also include an estimate of the importance and validity of his thought. But such an estimate could only be arrived at by the employment of one of two methods, neither of which was open to me. The one consists in the composition of a treatise upon ethical and metaphysical philosophy, interwoven with a discussion of the poet's various beliefs; the other in a comparison of these beliefs with some theory of the Universe, the truth of which could be taken for granted. While the first of these methods is clearly impracticable, the second has been pursued with considerable success by Professor Jones in his work on *Robert Browning as a religious and philosophical teacher*, where he has expounded the poet's philosophy alongside of his own, and praised or condemned its different elements according to the extent of their correspondence with the Hegelian position which he himself adopts. It was impossible, however, for me to claim the right either to propound or to postulate any theory of the Universe, and I was therefore debarred from estimating the value of Browning's thought by the method of comparison. Consequently, the only criticism upon which I could venture had to come, as it were, from inside his system, and to be directed towards ascertaining, not whether his

beliefs are absolutely valid, but how far they are consistent with one another. It must, however, be remembered that criticism of this kind presupposes the existence of a definite system of thought underlying the whole of his poetry, and that it is only upon this assumption that charges of inconsistency can fairly be urged against him. A growing conviction that his moods varied greatly at different times, not merely oscillating about a fixed and constant body of thought, but transforming the whole character of his outlook upon the world and making an unified philosophy impossible for him, has led me more and more to look upon my work as something of a *tour de force*; so that, were it not for the obligation imposed upon the successful candidate for the Burney Prize, I should hesitate long before undertaking to publish it.

The principal sources to which I have gone for information have, of course, been Browning's poems and his *Essay on Shelley*. I have received some guidance as to reading from Mrs Orr's *Handbook*, from the summary of the poems referred to, at the end of Professor Jones' work, and from Mr R. Somerville of Harrow School. Mr Nettleship's Collection of Essays, and Professor Dowden's article on *Tennyson and Browning*, though both admirable in their way, have not been of much assistance, but Mrs Orr's *Life of Browning* has occasionally thrown light upon

small points. The book by Professor Jones, to which I have already referred, covers the ground of this Essay much more nearly than any other, and I therefore postponed careful study of it till the later stages of my work. Some half-dozen quotations from Browning have been taken from it directly, but the great majority, though often identical with those used by the Professor, have been collected independently. I desire, however, frankly to acknowledge my indebtedness to this work, which undoubtedly suggested many lines of thought whose origin I cannot now remember.

Among those who have assisted me with advice and criticism, I desire to express my gratitude to Dr Peile and Mr C. F. G. Masterman of Christ's College, Cambridge. My thanks, however, are chiefly due to my friend, Mr J. R. P. Sclater of Emmanuel College, who has read the whole of the Essay both in manuscript and in proof, and has helped me very greatly in the work of preparing it for the Press.

A. C. P.

July, 1901.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
PREFACE	iii
INTRODUCTION	I
CHAPTER I.	
Browning's Conception of Deity	9
CHAPTER II.	
Christianity	32
CHAPTER III.	
Optimism	47
CHAPTER IV.	
Immortality	55
CHAPTER V.	
God's End for Man	62
CHAPTER VI.	
Progress	70

CHAPTER VII.

	PAGE
The Illusory Character of Evil	96

CHAPTER VIII.

Ethics	102
------------------	-----

CHAPTER IX.

Conclusion	119
----------------------	-----

APPENDIX	128
--------------------	-----

INTRODUCTION.

ANYONE who aspires to write a little book about a great author has to face the fact that he is rendering a very dubious service to the cause of literature. If he is unsuccessful, his labour is merely wasted, but if he succeeds, his book is liable to fall into the hands of those persons—a not inconsiderable class—who, while finding a superficial acquaintance with the works of our celebrated novelists and poets essential for conversational purposes, are nevertheless delighted to avail themselves of any means, whereby such an acquaintance may be obtained without the painful necessity of perusing the works themselves. Such a prospect is in itself sufficiently discouraging, but when the great author, whose writings are the subject of study, is a poet, and when it is a question, not of admiring the manner of his verse, but of analysing the matter it contains, the task becomes doubly difficult. To many indeed it appears that any attempt to extract the thought from poetry, and baldly state it in the form of a series of propositions, must necessarily fail. The attempt itself they are inclined to look upon as a kind of sacrilege and covert insult to

the poet, since, as they hold, true poetry cannot be analysed, and anything that can be so treated is unworthy of that high title. They are of opinion that to argue with a poet shows a want of imagination, while even to enquire, with all modesty, after the prose meaning of his verse proclaims a mind fettered and chained down to a vulgar literalism. If the poet's thought can be put into prose, it is even said, he had no business to write it otherwise himself. "Rhyme that has no inward necessity to be rhymed!" exclaims Carlyle, "it ought to have told us plainly, without any jingle, what it was aiming at. I would advise all men who can speak their thought not to sing it; to understand that in a serious time among serious men, there is no vocation in them for singing it." The favourite poet of Browning's youth is animated by the same sentiments, and declares that "nothing can be equally well expressed in prose, that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse¹."

No one would be foolish enough to deny that there is a considerable element of truth in this view. It is, of course, impossible to give an adequate prose version of any true poetry, for the music and the words are indissolubly blended in the unity of the song. But to deny the possibility of translating poetry into prose is a very different thing from declaring that a poet's thought is necessarily unanalysable. The secret of life is indeed concealed from the microscope of the scientist, but the structure of the organism can easily be exhibited. In precisely

¹ Shelley, Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*.

the same way, the thought of a poem can be displayed, though the source of its power remains a mystery. It is true that, before any analysis can be made, the poem must become as a dead thing in the hand of the investigator. He must approach it in a purely scientific spirit with his emotional nature well under control, or his hand will tremble in the act of dissecting it. But it cannot reasonably be said that this is a feat beyond his power, for the number of those must be very small, whose imaginations are so highly developed, or whose intellects are so weak, that they can never put themselves, as it were, outside a poem, and look upon it in the dry light of reason. It is not denied that when they have analysed the thought in poetry, they have only gone a very little way towards understanding the living thing; for the thought is not the life, but rather resembles the dry bones round which it is somehow mysteriously woven. Nor does the anatomist for a moment demur to the assertion that his function is subordinate. He merely protests against the unwarranted assumption that it is impossible, and against the false logic of those who hold that because he is unable to effect everything, he is therefore incapable of doing anything at all.

But even if it be conceded that the task he sets himself is a possible one, it is still open to the objector to say that it is useless. And at this point, without further metaphor, it must frankly be acknowledged that such an enquiry as that here proposed would not be worth undertaking in the case of the great majority of English poets. The element of

4 ROBERT BROWNING AS A RELIGIOUS TEACHER.

thought plays a very trifling part in the works of Mr Swinburne, for example ; music and rhythm are the essence of his verse ; he uses a hundred words, as Matthew Arnold said, where one would suffice, and is occasionally so careless of meaning that he might almost be accused of indulging in mere 'sound and fury, signifying nothing.' At the opposite pole to him and to the 'idle singers of an empty day,' is that small company of poets whose stress is almost entirely upon meaning. Tennyson may be said to occupy a position midway between these two classes. He is always very careful of the form of his verse, but the matter is generally substantial also. Fitzgerald, in the ardour of friendship, would have claimed for him a place beside immortals like Dante and Goethe, whose genius never finds intensity of meaning incompatible with perfection of form. Beneath the 'pellucid clearness' of his style he discerned a thinker fully as profound as Browning. This opinion has, however, found so few supporters, that there need be little hesitation in describing the author of the *Ring and the Book* as the most thoughtful of our modern poets. His concentration upon the thing he has to say is indeed so great, that elegancies in the manner of saying it are occasionally thrown to the winds, almost as ruthlessly as they are by Walt Whitman.

The thought of such a poet may well be worth examining for its own sake, apart from its emotional surroundings. But its value will, of course, depend to a large extent upon how far a consistent scheme of ideas can be found in it. If the different poems

were purely dramatic, and nothing more than psychological studies of various characters in different situations, a critical enquiry into the views expressed would probably end in disappointment, since it is exceedingly unlikely that any common element could be found in them. Certainly, it would be impossible in that case to treat of Browning as a 'religious teacher,' for a teacher with nothing definite to teach is an absurdity. Whether, and how far, the poet himself spoke through the mouth of his characters is a point that has been much discussed. But the question is comparatively unimportant from the point of view of this essay, so long as it can be shown that he has given us a consistent body of thought in his works. Provided that he had done this, his religious teaching could be examined with profit, even if it were proved that he himself sincerely disbelieved everything his writings taught. It would not matter in the least if the views he put forward were, as he declared them to be, "always dramatic in principle, so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine¹." So long as

"one imperial chord subsists,
Steadily underlies the accidental mists
Of music springing thence²,"

it is possible to attend to it, without enquiring whether the poet himself approves, though it is, of course, true that those who are accustomed to accept opinions upon the strength of their author's reputation would be

¹ Preface to *Pauline*.

² *Fifine at the Fair*.

6 ROBERT BROWNING AS A RELIGIOUS TEACHER.

not a little disturbed by the discovery that he himself was not convinced of the validity of the views which he expounded. But, after all, if a common trend of thought is admitted to run through his work,—and that such is in fact the case every reader of Browning will agree—the critic must be very perverse, who would declare it to be dramatic. For it is hardly conceivable that any writer should continually depict the same ideal among every variety of scene and circumstance, unless that ideal were his own.

The poet himself, in his *Essay on Shelley*, gives ground for rejecting the suggestion of entire detachment from his work, which is put forward in *House* and *At the Mermaid*. "Certainly," he writes, "in the face of any conspicuous achievement of genius, philosophy, no less than sympathetic instinct, warrants our belief in a great moral purpose having mainly inspired, even when it does not visibly look out of the same¹." Throughout his writings there is

"Something of mine which, mixed up with the mass,
Made it bear hammer and be firm to file²."

This is introduced in two ways ; first, in the selection of his characters, and, afterwards, in his treatment of them. As Mrs Orr says, "he does not sink himself in his men and women, for his sympathy with them is too active to admit it. He not only describes their different modes of being, but defends them from their own point of view ; and it is natural that he should often select for this treatment characters with which

¹ *Essay on Shelley*.

² *The Ring and the Book*.

he is already disposed to sympathize¹." Further, in the excellent words of Mr Nettleship, "especially when the subject is one in which religion forms a part, whatever the date of the story may be, the impulse seems irresistible to add to the probable thoughts of the dramatic personage, the possible thoughts, which, were he as far-seeing as the poet himself at this day, would have arisen out of his actual knowledge, and been prompted by his hypothetical aspirations²." As illustrations of this tendency, Mr Nettleship instances four comparatively early poems, *Saul*, *Karshish*, *Master Hugues*, and *Cleon*. To these might be added many more, notably *A Death in the Desert*, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, *Ferishtah's Fancies*, and the *Parleyings*.

Of course many of Browning's characters express opinions which he cannot be supposed to share, and occasionally, as in *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* and *Fifine at the Fair*, it is difficult to discover the exact point at which he and his hero diverge. But taking the whole range of his work into account, few poets can be said to have revealed themselves so completely as he has done. His writings are dramatic in form rather than in principle; his own scheme of thought can be traced through them; and this is definite enough to be systematically expounded. As far as the broad outlines of the scheme are concerned, there is no room for differences of opinion. The one imperial chord of love underlies it. Defect ensures completion; hope is the promise of supply; evil will perish, and good will triumph;

¹ *Handbook*, p. 2.

² Introduction to *Essays on Browning*.

8 ROBERT BROWNING AS A RELIGIOUS TEACHER.

"For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,
'Seem here no painful inch to gain,
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
Comes silent, flooding in, the main¹."

But the more detailed portions of Browning's scheme are, of course, less clearly defined, nor is the relation between different parts of it always very easy to see. The purpose of the following pages will be to expound his religious and philosophic views as far as possible in a connected form.

¹ Clough: Say not the struggle nought availeth.

CHAPTER I.

BROWNING'S CONCEPTION OF DEITY.

"I TAKE it for granted," says Professor Ward, "that till an idealistic (i.e., spiritualistic) view of the world can be sustained, any exposition of theism is but wasted labour¹." As a preliminary to discussing the nature of God, it is necessary to dispose of the view that the world of our experience is an independent reality, about which we have acquired "a vast circle of empirical knowledge, within the whole range of which the idea of a Necessary Being, or First Cause, has no place"²; for otherwise all enquiry into God's attributes is liable to be abruptly closed by a flat denial of His existence. Consequently, the part of Browning's system of thought which it is logically proper to discuss first, is that which has reference to the opinion that it is possible for science to build up a complete explanation of the universe upon a purely physical basis.

¹ Preface to *Naturalism and Agnosticism*, I. vii.

² Introduction to *Naturalism*, p. 5.

IO ROBERT BROWNING AS A RELIGIOUS TEACHER.

This preliminary enquiry presents no great difficulty. It is easy to show that the poet is entirely opposed to all forms of Naturalism, and believes in the existence of an Intelligent Spirit, 'through whom are all things, and without whom was not anything made that was made.' "This is the glory," exclaims Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,

"that in all conceived,
Or felt or known, I recognize a mind,
Not mine, but like mine, for the double joy,
Making all things for me, and me for Him¹."

The evolutionary hypothesis does not offer any obstacle to this belief, for whether the world be the result of a single creative act, or of a gradual process, it is equally certain that 'earth did not make itself, but came of somebody².' The old cosmological argument for the existence of God is unaffected by modern ideas about natural development. For the essence of the difference between the older and the newer doctrine lies simply in this: 'that the causality which the former concentrates, the latter distributes; the fiat of a moment bursts open, and spreads itself along the path of perpetuity³.' Though scientists may prove that the universe is subject to a rigid and unalterable system of natural laws, it still remains true that these laws must themselves be subject to a lord, who is spiritual. "The stroke that came transmitted through a whole galaxy of elastic balls, was it less a stroke," demands Carlyle,

¹ *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.*

² *Fifine at the Fair.*

³ Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, p. 13.

"than if the last ball only had been struck and sent flying¹?" Browning replies, as he does, that in both cases equally, thought is forced back till it finds an explanation in the striker's will;

"All is effect of Cause;
As it would, has willed and done
Power: and my mind's applause
Goes, passing laws each one,
To Omnipotence, lord of laws²."

Consequently, the law of evolutionary development should be regarded as a tool wielded by the hand of God, and not as a mere blind force. Science declares that it finds no bar between the 'jelly-lump' and the 'unbroken man.' But, replies the poet, to admit this is not to justify the conclusions of Naturalism;

"Yes—and who welds a lump of ore, suppose
He likes to make a chain and not a bar,
And reach by link on link, link small, link large,
Out to the due length,—why there's forethought still
Outside o' the series, forging at one end³."

Man is still a work of God no less than if he had been fashioned by His hands in the garden of Eden. Veil after veil may be plucked from nature by the busy seeker after truth, but, as the process continues, Browning always finds in it fresh support for his belief that the Cause is 'not inmost' but 'externe⁴.' The cause of anything is not the machine that made it, nor the machine by which that in turn was made. However long the chain of mechanical devices may

¹ *Sartor Resartus*, p. 183.

² *Reverie*.

³ *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*.

⁴ *Francis Furini*.

12 ROBERT BROWNING AS A RELIGIOUS TEACHER.

be, the mind is forced to postulate an intelligent agent behind them. To Browning 'the kind of critical intelligence' is simply laughable, which believes

"last link had last but one
For parent, and no link was, first of all,
Fitted to anvil, hammered into shape¹."

The apparent completeness and self-sufficiency of the particular sciences troubles him as little as it does Professor Ward. "It is true," says that writer, "that science has no need, and indeed, can make no use, in any particular instance, of the theistic hypothesis. That hypothesis is specially applicable to nothing just because it claims to be equally applicable to everything. Recourse to it as an explanation of any specific problem would involve just that discontinuity which it is the cardinal rule of scientific method to avoid. But, because reference to the Deity will not serve for a physical explanation in physics or a chemical explanation in chemistry, it does not therefore follow that the sum total of scientific knowledge is equally intelligible whether we accept the theistic hypothesis or not²." It must be observed, however, that Browning's method is very different from that of the Cambridge professor. For while this careful thinker, in the course of a profound attempt to establish a spiritualistic monism, only ventures to suggest that 'from a world of spirits to a Supreme Spirit is a possible step,' the poet is quite

¹ *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.*

² *Naturalism and Agnosticism*, Vol. I, p. 24.

content with a form of the cosmological argument as a philosophical support for his theism.

His argument, indeed, amounts to little more than an elaboration of Paley's time-honoured analogy of the watchmaker and the watch. This is, of course, fallacious in point of logic; for the obvious retort to anyone who challenges an agnostic with the question 'Who made the world?' is, as James Mill was careful to instruct the youthful John, the corresponding question, 'Who made God?' As Kant showed, there is in the cosmological argument the further flaw that it makes the judgment that everything must have a Cause, which rests upon induction from experience of particular phenomena, apply to the relation between the universe as a whole and a Cause which is not phenomenal¹. That the argument is unsatisfactory is admitted by theologians², and must have been well known to Browning. Consequently, he only uses it as a kind of secondary support for theism, and in his more reflective poems, falls back upon a stronger position.

Abandoning the ground of inference, he speaks of his knowledge of God's existence as the result of direct intuition. The fact of his own existence is to him incontrovertibly certain, but it is as inconceivable apart from the existence of a Cause, as is the idea of a circumference apart from a centre, or of an angle without enclosing sides. With his immediate knowledge of himself, the knowledge of a Cause is interwoven and involved, appearing as a pre-

¹ Cf. Külpe, *Introduction to Philosophy*, p. 166.

² e.g., J. Caird, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*.

supposition of all his reasoning, rather than as a result of it ;

“ I have questioned and am answered. Question, answer, presuppose

Two points ; that the thing itself, which questions, answers—*is*, it knows ;

As it also knows the thing perceived outside itself,—a force Actual ere its own beginning, operative through its course, Unaffected by its end,—that this thing likewise needs must be ;

Call this—God, then, call that—soul, and both—the only facts for me¹. ”

For him, as for Newman, there are ‘two and only two supreme and luminously self-evident beings in the universe—himself and his Creator².’ His belief that ‘before me was my Cause that’s styled God³’ does not in the last resort depend upon any deductive process, but, like the knowledge of his own existence, is immediate and direct. Though everything else were doubtful, and knowledge were to fail in every other respect, at this one point he stands upon the firm rock of truth. In his earliest poem he showed that ‘he at least believed in soul, was very sure of God⁴,’ and to the end of his life the remark which Luria applies to the races of the East, that ‘they feel Him, not by painful reason know,’ is equally true of the poet himself. For, indeed, it is not merely God’s existence, but His immediate presence that is intuitively perceived ; so that it is as unnecessary for Browning to argue about theism as it would be

¹ *La Saisiaz*.

³ *Francis Furini*.

² *Apologia*, p. 59. Cp. also p. 323.

⁴ *La Saisiaz*. Cp. *Pauline*.

for him to endeavour to prove the existence of a friend, with whom he was in daily converse. His attitude is that of one who stands face to face with God in the sanctuary where Spirit meets with Spirit. He is not behind Abt Vogler and the musicians in his assurance of intimate communion with the Highest. "The rest may reason and welcome," cries the composer, in the enthusiasm of triumphant art, "but we musicians know." The existence of God, like the existence of the self, is incapable of proof simply because of its absolute self-evidence;

"Prove them facts? That they o'erpass my power of proving, proves them such :

Fact it is I know I know not something which is fact as much¹."

The same view is taken by the poet in the *Parleyings* with Francis Furini, where he affirms it to be equally self-evident, that the 'Cause before him' is also the originator of the whole of his experience ;

"Knowledge so far impinges on the Cause
Before me, that I know,—by certain laws
Wholly unknown, whate'er I apprehend
Within, without me, had its rise ; thus blend
I, and all things perceived, in one effect²."

The existence of God as the universal Cause is thus established by immediate intuition. But since an empty conception of this kind is found to be incapable of satisfying the spirit of man, Browning endeavours to give it a fuller and more definite content. Setting himself to 'conjecture of the worker by the work,' he traverses the whole world of his

¹ *La Saisiaz*.

² *Francis Furini*.

experience, comprising, as it does, external nature, the men that he sees around him, and his own inmost thoughts and aspirations. It will presently be necessary to notice the inferences which he draws from the world of external objects; but there can be no question that the first and most important scene of his enquiry is 'the temple-cave of his own self.' "There," says a contemporary poet,

"brooding by the central altar, thou
May'st haply learn the Nameless hath a voice,
By which thou wilt abide, if thou be wise¹."

Browning believed, with Tennyson, that it was through his own internal experiences that he could come nearest to a true conception of the nature of God. His method presupposes, as a necessary relation between Cause and Effect, that the latter cannot be greater than the former. If this be granted, it becomes possible to draw up a kind of minimum presentation of God, to which He, at all events, is not inferior. Whatever noble or exalted qualities exist in man must exist, in at least equal fulness, in his Maker, and to whatever heights God's works may rise, He Himself must equal or surpass them. In this way, the poet argues from his highest ideal to the God who made it. Since it is His work, it cannot be greater than He is²; but is made in His image, and bears the impress of His hand.

¹ Tennyson, *The Ancient Sage*.

² This does not follow in strict logic from the principle that an Effect cannot be greater than its Cause. The correct inference is that God cannot be less than a Being *possessed of* as high an ideal conception as the highest possessed by man.

But in thus speaking of God as revealed in our highest ideal there lurks an important ambiguity. There is a similar difficulty to be met in the case of the preliminary proposition that a Cause must necessarily be greater than its Effect; for to speak of 'highest' and 'greater' in this way seems to imply that a standard is known, by reference to which comparisons can be made. Some persons, however, would maintain that no such absolute standard exists, and yet others, that even if it does exist, and even if valid comparison is possible from an absolute point of view, the standard is necessarily unknown to us, and the absolute point of view beyond our reach. For in what respect is the greatness of a planet commensurate with that of a thinking Being, or the height of an ideal conception with that of a real thing? Or again, how is the relative height of different ideals affected by the fact that one of them appears to contain within itself elements that contradict each other? Browning's own ideal of God fails in this respect, as he himself admits in the Parable of *The Sun*, where he points out the hopelessness of attempting to reconcile Omnipotence with the possession, either of will or of any moral qualities ;

"Power !

—What need of will then? nought opposes power ;
 Why purpose? any change must be for worse ;
 And what occasion for beneficence,
 When all that is, so is and so must be?
 Best being best now, change were for the worse¹."

There seems to be no means of judging whether the

¹ *The Sun*.

contradiction implicit in the conception of a God, who is infinite in power, will and love, makes it a less lofty ideal than one, the elements of which are lower individually, but more harmonious with one another.

When confronted with objections of this kind, which amount in essence to a denial of our capacity for forming judgements of moral beauty, Browning simply replies that, as a matter of fact, he himself can and does pronounce such judgements. He perceives with perfect clearness when one act is greater or one ideal higher than another, and is as certain of his conclusion as he would be if he were comparing the length of two lines or the pitch of two notes. Just as a magnet is attracted by steel and not by lead, so approbation is drawn from him by one combination of qualities, and not by another. He pronounces a thing better or worse in accordance with the direct perception of his moral sense.

It is, however, open to an objector to urge that the real point in dispute is, not whether judgements of moral beauty exist, but whether they can be shown to be valid. Browning cannot but admit that in order to establish the validity of any proposition, more is necessary than the bare statement that it is arrived at by direct intuition. For, in view of the very divergent intuitions that appear to exist among men with regard to moral questions, there is even a certain probability that any particular one of them will be erroneous ;

“Now who shall arbitrate?

Ten men love what I hate,

Shun what I follow, slight what I receive;

Ten, who in ears and eyes
 Match me; we all surmise,
 They this thing, and I that: whom shall my soul believe¹?"

This conflict of opinion compels Browning to seek for some criterion of the truth of his beliefs outside the beliefs themselves, and thus sets him speculating upon the metaphysics of knowledge. Where so many professed students of philosophy have stumbled, it could hardly be expected that a poet should stand firm; nor need it surprise us to find that, like one 'in wandering mazes lost,' Browning speaks with a very hesitating and uncertain voice.

Sometimes he holds the language of absolute scepticism, and declares that 'living here means nescience simply.' If anyone challenges him to prove that what he calls good and high is not really bad and low, he has to confess that he is unable to satisfy him. He is bound to admit that his ideas upon these points *may* be utterly perverted, and that if this is so the whole of his philosophy is worthless. 'All around ignorance wraps him,' and, although, as it seems, 'cloud breaks and lets blink the sky just overhead, not elsewhere,' yet in the last analysis,

"What assures
 His optics that the very blue which lures
 Comes not of black outside it, doubly dense?
 Ignorance overwraps his moral sense,
 Winds him about, relaxing, as it wraps,
 So much and no more than lets through perhaps
 The murmured knowledge—"Ignorance exists²."

¹ *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*

² *Francis Furini.*

No professed agnostic could plead guilty to completer ignorance than this, nor make a franker admission of the ultimate failure of knowledge. But the view which Browning generally adopted was less sceptical. While holding it to be impossible for men to know the absolute truth about heavenly things, he yet believed that knowledge was vouchsafed to us 'according to the measure of a man.' Upon this view, his highest ideal, while not indeed giving a complete picture of God as He is, yet represents Him 'in such conception as my mind allows,'

"Here by the little mind of man reduced
To littleness that suits his faculty¹."

This revelation of Him is confessedly inadequate, and therefore in a sense false; but it is nevertheless more fitting to say that God is the highest that we can conceive *and more*, than to say that He is not what we conceive Him to be. For man's mind is a mirror which displays His glory on a diminished scale, just as an 'optic glass' draws the sun's rays together, and reveals 'the very sun in little,' reduced to a mere pin-point circle, yet 'all the same comprising the sun's self².'

Pope Innocent, who more than any other character seems to speak for Browning, is only expressing this thought under a slightly different form, when he asks,

"Man's mind, what is it but a convex glass,
Wherein are gathered all the scattered points
Picked out of the immensity of sky,

¹ *The Pope.*

² *The Sun.*

To reunite there, be our heaven for earth,
Our known unknown, our God revealed to men¹?"

This view that reality is partially represented in thought, is, for Browning, bound up with the further doctrine that the representation of it is continually growing more complete. "An absolute vision," he says, "is not for this world, but we are permitted a continual approximation to it²." Our destiny is to 'creep ever on from fancies to the fact,' as

"Truth successively takes shape one grade above
Its last presentment³."

"Man, therefore, thus conditioned must expect
He could not, what he knows now, know at first;
What he considers that he knows to-day,
Come but to-morrow, he will find misknown;
Getting increase of knowledge, since he learns
Because he lives, which is to be a man⁴."

It is clear, however, that this doctrine necessarily involves the admission that human knowledge is at best unreliable, and that none of the things which we say we know are really more than roughly guessed.

"Hence
Must truth be casual truth, elicited
In sparks so mean, at intervals disspread
So rarely, that 'tis like at no one time
Of the world's story has not truth, the prime
Of truth, the very truth, which, loosed had hurled
The world's course right, been really in the world,
—Content the while with some mean spark by dint
Of some chance blow, the solitary hint
Of buried fire⁵."

¹ *The Pope.*

² *Essay on Shelley.*

³ *Fifine at the Fair.*

⁴ *A Death in the Desert.*

⁵ *Sordello.*

But, when once he has admitted that his knowledge is only partially valid, the poet is liable to be challenged to show how the wheat can be separated from the chaff, and thus to be driven back once more among the difficulties in which he became involved when searching for a criterion of truth. The theory that knowledge is progressive therefore fails, in the last resort, to deliver him from metaphysical scepticism; and he is urged on towards a third theory which cuts the Gordian knot by abandoning the metaphysical standpoint altogether. Since speculation about the grounds of knowledge leads only to scepticism, he concludes, not that a sceptical attitude is the right one, but that metaphysics is a false guide. All his beliefs may, indeed, be utterly erroneous, but it is impossible for him as a man, seriously and steadily to hold this. To do so would be to live in a state of perpetual self-contradiction, believing that what he believed to be true was very likely false, and thinking that what he thought good was not improbably bad. Metaphysics, therefore, falls self slain amid a swarm of paradoxes, and direct experience resumes the field. Difficulties arising out of the conflict of opinion among different men are put quietly aside. The poet fully acknowledges that others may think differently from him, and does not claim to speak for them ;

“O world, outspread beneath me! only for myself I speak,
Nowise dare to play the spokesman for my brothers
strong and weak,
Full and empty, wise and foolish, good and bad, in every
age¹.”

¹ *La Saisiaz*.

When their perceptual or moral judgements contradict his own, his equanimity is in no way disturbed, for their opinions do not concern him. Stepping down from the plane of philosophy, he declares that for all practical purposes it is simply impossible for him to go behind the immediate experience of certainty contained in his intuitive judgements. "My own experience," he says deliberately, "that is knowledge"—the only knowledge possible for him,—or in the memorable words of the Pope's summing up,

"I must outlive a thing ere know it dead;
When I outlive the faith there is a sun,
When I lie, ashes to the very soul,—
Someone, not I, must wail above the heap,
'He died in dark whence never morn arose!'"

Whatever value his judgements of good and bad, great and little, high and low, may possess in the eyes of others, he himself does not question, but stands to them simply because 'he can no other.'

These three views, that knowledge is impossible, that it is progressive, that it is to be found in the direct perceptions of experience, all appear in different passages of Browning's writings, and are used in different parts of his system. In developing his doctrine of God, he generally has the progressive theory uppermost in his mind, and therefore concludes that in his highest ideal conception a provisional and not a full revelation of Him is to be found. But, having once admitted that to speculative thought God in His absolute reality can only appear as

¹ *The Pope.*

transcending human comprehension and 'appreciable solely by Himself,' the poet passes at once to the standpoint of his third theory of knowledge, and, for all the ordinary purposes of life, treats the witness of his ideal as final and conclusive.

Having surveyed the route by which he arrived at this result, we must now enquire into the content of his ideal, and so consider the attributes which he was prepared to predicate of the Creator.

In the first place, he holds that God partakes of the nature of mind and not of matter. This belief is so fundamental with him that it appears to be involved in his intuitive conviction that a Cause exists, and therefore to be independent of arguments drawn from a comparison of his ideal conceptions. But such a comparison may be made to afford a further demonstration of its truth; for since Browning unhesitatingly pronounces mind to be superior to matter, it follows that the conception of a material Being cannot be the highest to which he is capable of attaining. The Pope, in a few lines packed full of meaning, traces the steps by which he has reached his idea of God. At the lowest stage is dead matter; then come the rudimentary minds of the beasts; and finally man's mind, which is the highest of known things. Before the making of man there was no sign of moral sense in the world, and though after him there yet may dawn some 'far-off divine event,' which turns

"Evil to good, and wrong to right, unlearns
All man's experience learned since man was he¹,

¹ *Francis Furini.*

yet, till the dawning of that day, for all his impotence and ignorance, we must

“Accept in man advanced to this degree
The prime mind¹.”

This argument of Francis Furini is merely an expansion of the Pope's summary,

“Mind is not matter, nor from matter, but
Above,—leave matter then, proceed with mind!
Man's be the mind recognized at the height,—
Leave the inferior minds and look at man²!”

But though in the actual world as he sees it man finds himself supreme; though, ‘while the peak is high and the stars are high,’ ‘the thought of a man is higher³,’ yet there is a conceivable height which rises far above him, and casts a giant shadow on his path. For man is put to shame by the ideal which he carries with him;

“Is he the strong, intelligent and good
Up to his own conceivable height? Nowise.
Enough o' the low,—soar the conceivable height⁴!”

Infinite strength, intelligence, and goodness, which constitute this ideal, are the attributes of Browning's God. That he is ‘Strong, wise, good—this I know at any rate, in my own self’ says Furini. This is the undoubted truth that is thrown by Ferishtah to his disciple to ‘take and try conclusions with,’

“‘God is all-good, all-wise, all-powerful⁵.’”

The Pope, too, in the twilight of his life, bears

¹ *Francis Furini.*

² *The Pope.*

³ Tennyson.

⁴ *The Pope.*

⁵ *A Beanstripe.*

witness to the same creed, when he speaks of himself, as one

“Within whose circle of experience burns
The central truth, Power, Wisdom, Goodness—God¹.”

Of these three attributes of the Creator, the two first, power and wisdom, are considered by Browning to be established beyond the possibility of dispute, since their existence is not merely uncontradicted, but strikingly confirmed, by the testimony of His creations in the world of perceived things. But this is not the case with His goodness, or in Browning's more usual phrase, His love. ‘The invisible things of Him,’ that ‘are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made’ are, in St Paul's words, ‘His everlasting power and divinity²,’ but not His eternal love. Consequently, with regard to this attribute of the divine Cause, an apparent contradiction has to be resolved between the witness of the poet's internal and external experience³. This would be sufficient, quite apart from the transcendent importance which he ascribes to love in comparison with all other qualities, to account for the ardour and frequency with which he discusses it. For he regards power and intelligence as attributes of ‘the Cause,’ to which all parts of his experience agree in bearing witness, but love as one with regard to which the evidence is conflicting. External nature, insignificant as it is in comparison with God, or even with man, stands out, nevertheless, as

¹ *The Pope*.

² Rom. i. 20.

³ The difficulties involved in this distinction are not now in question.

“‘the finger mark of Him
The immeasurably matchless¹,’”

where man may learn his lesson,

“Is there strength there?—enough: intelligence?
Ample².”

With Fra Lippo Lippi Browning had looked out
upon the world, and seen

“The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises,—and God made it all³.”

‘Just as, when standing face to face with his fellows,
he reads the glance of the eye, the sudden start, or
the wringing of the hands, and refers them home to
the viewless soul of another; so with diviner and
more wondering suspicion does he discern behind the
looks and movements of nature, a Mind that is the
seat of power, and the spring of every change⁴.’
There are faults, no doubt, but they are not faults
of weakness, nor is the strong God of the ancient
Hebrews, whose footstool is the earth, and the
heaven His throne, ever without witness among men;
for

“Though master keeps aloof,
Signs of His presence multiply from roof
To basement of the building⁵.”

Thus there is no difficulty in learning the lesson of
God’s wisdom and power, which is revealed, from the

¹ *Francis Furini.*

² *The Pope.*

³ *Fra Lippo Lippi.*

⁴ Martineau. *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, p. 2.

⁵ *Francis Furini.*

first, in the marvels of nature and the 'immensities' of the sky¹. But the other lesson is one that has to be wrestled with in the face of an apparent antinomy. It is only at the very end of his life that Rabbi Ben Ezra can say, 'I who saw Power, see now Love perfect too,' and Browning, speaking in his own person in one of his latest poems, expresses the same thought in the words,

"From the first Power was—I knew;
Life has made clear to me
That, strive but for closer view,
Love were as plain to see²."

It must not, however, be supposed, from such passages as these, that the witness of his inner self ever wavered. In spite of the difficulties presented by external experience he was as firmly persuaded as St Paul that 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God³,' to whom he cries,

"God, thou art love! I build my faith on that.

.
It were too strange that I should doubt thy love⁴."

But since his external experience seems to give the lie to this conviction, he feels himself driven to proclaim its truth more and more emphatically, and to employ all the resources of rhetoric and dialectic in support of his position. Not only, he argues, would

¹ *Christmas Eve*.

³ Romans viii. 38.

² *Reverie*.

⁴ *Paracelsus*.

God be inferior to the ideal which He has created in man, if He were not loving; but He would be inferior to man himself. For, with all his weakness and ignorance, man has the will to supply the omissions and mend the faults, which he sees in everything around him; and in the strength of this moral superiority, would take the title 'First, last and best of things';

"Man takes that title now, if he believes
 Might can exist with neither will nor love,
 In God's case—what he names now Nature's Law—
 While in himself he recognizes love
 No less than might and will; and rightly takes.
 Since if man prove the sole existent thing
 Where these combine, whatever their degree,
 However weak the might or will or love,
 So they be found there, put in evidence—
 He is as surely higher in the scale
 Than any might with neither love nor will,
 As life, apparent in the poorest midge,
 (When the faint dust-speck flits, ye guess its wing)
 Is marvellous beyond dead Atlas' self—
 Given to the nobler midge for resting-place!¹"

For it is 'the presence of the highest faculty that gives rank in virtue of its kind, not degree; no pretension of a lower nature, whatever the completeness of development or variety of effect, impeding the precedency of the rarer endowment though only in the germ².' Love is an attribute so much loftier than power that the minutest trace of it in the most insignificant creature is a greater thing than the force that moulds an universe. Nay,

¹ *A Death in the Desert.*

² *Essay on Shelley.*

"The loving worm within its clod
 Were diviner than a loveless God
 Amid his worlds, I will dare to say¹?"

Man therefore, finding love strong in his own nature, would accept preeminence over a God 'who could the best,' but 'willed the worst'. While bending, like Caliban, before His power, he would sit in judgment upon His moral nature, in virtue of the brighter crown of righteousness with which his own human brows were decked². But his exaltation to this moral eminence could only be the source of infinite misery;

"The victory leads but to defeat,
 The gain to loss, best rise to the worst fall,
 His life becomes impossible, which is death⁴."

For what could he do but for ever bemoan the magnificence of the height to which he had attained, till, seeing himself left without hope or guiding light in the world, he were driven to send forth that exceeding bitter cry,

"Oh, dread succession to a dizzy post,
 Sad sway of sceptre whose mere touch appals,
 Ghastly dethronement, cursed by those the most,
 On whose repugnant brow the crown next falls⁵."

A little reflection, however, soon shows that man is not really destined to this glorious misery; because the very 'rule of right' in the light of which he condemns a loveless God, is itself God's work in him. It is not 'man's sole work, his birth of heart and brain,' but a good gift coming down from the Father

¹ *Christmas Eve.*

² *A Beanstripe.*

³ *Francis Furini.*

⁴ *A Death in the Desert.*

⁵ *Epilogue: Renan.*

of Lights. Therefore, 'the bubble breaks here,' since God cannot make anything greater than Himself.

Thus Browning bases two distinct arguments in favour of God's love upon the one principle that an effect cannot be greater than its cause. In the first place, since God is the Cause of the love that is in man, He must Himself be loving. And in the second, since He is the Cause of man's conception of an All-loving Being, He must be All-loving. In His presence the deepest human affections seem as trivial and insignificant as a tiny spark before the fierce light of the sun. They are faint and imperfect copies of that transcendent Original—that 'truth in God's breast,'—which is daily impressed upon our own. Hence it is absurd to brush aside our conception of a loving God upon the ground that it is 'mere projection from man's inmost mind,' a reflection of his own nature which he unconsciously throws upon the clear glass of the Infinite; for even if it were true that, in this sense, God is made in the image of man, yet the pattern from which our idea of Him is supposed to be copied, being itself His work, cannot possibly excel Him. Therefore every proof that man gives of his own capacity for love, instead of suggesting, as some hold, a simple method by which our belief in divine love can be explained away, affords, if rightly viewed, strong evidence in support of it¹.

¹ Cp. *A Death in the Desert*.

CHAPTER II.

CHRISTIANITY.

THE doctrine of divine love is of course intimately bound up with, and constitutes, perhaps, the most fundamental tenet of Christian theology. But, as was shown in the last chapter, it may be reached without direct reference to the narrative of the gospels, and can, according to Browning's view, be developed still further along Christian lines by a purely deductive method. Thus, continuing the argument from his own highest ideal conception, he concludes that perfect love must be capable of self-sacrifice ; for, as Principal Caird says, "if there was no sense in which God could give Himself to the beings He has made in His own image, or could bear the burden of pain and sorrow for their redemption from evil, then that in which intuitively we discern the highest ideal of moral nobility would be an element of greatness unknown to God¹."

It is not, however, enough to say that God must be capable of suffering for men, should the necessity

¹ *Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, II. 145.

arise; for, since it is only in the immediate act of self-sacrifice that the conceivable height of love is attained, He must somehow in very fact suffer for them.

"Would I suffer for him that I love? So would'st thou,—so wilt thou!

So shall crown thee the topmost, ineffablest, uttermost crown,—
And thy love fill infinitude wholly, nor leave, up nor down,
One spot for the creature to stand in!¹"

It also appears to follow from this line of argument that the self-sacrifice of God must be absolutely unlimited, for otherwise it would fall short of our ideal of moral grandeur. Consequently, His transcendent act cannot be confined to 'the space of half an hour' or even within the limits of 'the sinless years that breathed beneath the Syrian blue'; but the agony in the Garden expands throughout the ages, and becomes a

"divine instance of self-sacrifice
Which never ends, and aye begins for man²."

The face of the Crucified stirs from the fixed point that has been assigned to it in time, and, soaring beyond the range of historical criticism, neither falters before the gaze of philosophy, nor dwindles across the darkness, but

"rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows³."

For is not the 'author of our salvation' still, in every moment as it passes, 'made perfect by suffering'?

¹ *Saul.*

² *The Pope.*

³ *Epilogue: Third Speaker.*

"Is not God now i' the world His power first made?
 Is not His love at issue still with sin,
 Visibly when a wrong is done on earth¹?"

The doctrine of the never-ending self-sacrifice of a loving God appears to Browning as one of those deeper truths which set aside 'speech, act, time, place indeed, but bring nakedly forward now the principle of things²,' and are deducible, not so much from historical evidence, as from the ideals of his own heart.

The tenets of Christianity which relate to definite historical events are, however, on a slightly different footing. It is true that an increased probability attaches to them so soon as the broad doctrine of divine love is accepted, since it thereupon ceases to be open to anyone to urge that God may be a malevolent Being, who would laugh at the idea of a voluntary death upon the cross. But since it is obviously impossible to arrive *à priori* at a proof of the occurrence of any historical event, nothing that has been said hitherto can be taken to demonstrate that Browning accepted the narrative of the gospels.

Before examining his opinions upon this point, it may be well to guard against misapprehension by briefly defining what he considered to be most fundamental in the purely historical doctrines of Christianity. In the light of *Saul*, *Christmas Eve*, and the conclusion of *An Epistle from Karshish*, this may be expressed in the words of St Paul, that "Christ Jesus, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made

¹ *A Death in the Desert.*

² *Fifine at the Fair.*

Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross¹."

We must attempt to reach some conclusion as to the attitude which Browning assumed towards these fundamental doctrines of the Incarnation and Crucifixion, enquiring, first, what position he assigned to them as a means for revealing the truth about God's eternal nature, and secondly, whether he believed them to be true in themselves.

With regard to the former point the evidence is slightly conflicting; for it is implied in some parts of *A Death in the Desert* that the doctrine of divine love and self-sacrifice can be reached in no other way than through the gospel story. But this is not the view generally taken in Browning's writings, nor can the expression of it in *A Death in the Desert* carry great weight, when the dramatic setting of that work is taken into account. Besides, it is contradicted by implication in the same poem, when St John bids, not everybody, but only those whose eyes are too weak to bear the naked light of perfect truth, reverently to pore over the gospel narrative, till the infinite power and self-sacrificing love of God grow visible through it. The contradiction becomes explicit in *Paracelsus*, *Saul*, *Christmas Eve*, *The Ring and the Book* and other poems, where the doctrine of divine love is deduced, quite independently of the

¹ Phil. ii. 6—8.

Christian revelation, from the ideal of love which man finds in himself; while in Ferishtah's fancies that revelation is finally deposed from the high place assigned to it by St John, and is spoken of merely as a supplementary support to a position already established by other means.

It might, of course, be maintained that though the doctrine of divine love and self-sacrifice may be immediately dependent upon an ideal conception of our own, it is ultimately dependent upon historical revelation, because our ideal only becomes explicit under the influence of the gospel story. But nothing can be found in Browning's writings to suggest that he took this view; and we may therefore conclude that he believed man to be capable of beating out the doctrine for himself, without reference to the historical records of the Christian faith. But though 'man' may be thus privileged, there are many unlearned men and women to whom the simple narrative of the life of Jesus is a necessity. For them 'truth embodied in a tale' can enter in where philosophy gains no hearing. Though to a few of the wise and great the power and love of God may be made manifest in their essential purity, the mass of men still need to have it revealed to them in a less direct way, and, as the dying apostle declares,

"must apprehend what truth
I see, reduced to plain historic fact,
Diminished into clearness, proved a point,
And far away; ye would withdraw your sense
From out eternity, strain it upon time,
Then stand before that fact, that Life and Death,

Stay there at gaze, till it dispart, dispread,
As though a star should open out, all sides,
Grow the world on you, as it is my world¹."

If it had appeared that Browning regarded a belief in the gospel story as the only means by which 'man' could be brought to realize the truth of divine love, it might have been argued, without more ado, that for him this story must have appeared true, or at least as binding upon belief as truth could be. But such an argument is clearly inadmissible, when it has been shown that he merely holds the gospel narrative to be the only means by which *some* people can be brought to grasp this great pronouncement of Christian theology. The question as to whether or not he believed the fundamental tenets of Christian history to be true must therefore be examined upon its own merits.

In such an examination it would not, however, be reasonable to ignore the parallel which subsists between the general trend of his thought and that of Christian apologists. The closeness of this correspondence is borne out by the frequency with which it has been found possible, in this essay, to quote from Professor Caird's work on the *Fundamental Ideas of Christianity* in illustration of Browning's views. And though his acceptance of that part of Christian doctrine, which relates to the nature of God, does not logically imply that he must accept the remainder of it, it may nevertheless be said to raise a certain presumption that this will be the case.

¹ *A Death in the Desert.*

This presumption is strengthened by a consideration of the large number of characters, who are presumably believers in the gospel story, that Browning introduces into his writings. He may be expected to select, for his men and women, people with whose general point of view he is in sympathy ; and we find among them the Pope, St John, Pamphylax, David, Pompilia, Caponsacchi, the hero of *Christmas Eve*, and one who is prepared to answer Renan. The story is also frequently referred to by non-Christian characters, and, except in *Cleon*—where the statement that Paul's doctrine 'could be held by no sane man' is obviously prompted by a sense of dramatic irony—is always treated with the most profound reverence. There is nothing to choose in this respect between the tone of Rabbi Ben Ezra's dying speech in *Holy Cross Day*, and that of the Arab physician's *Epistle*. Ferishtah not only speaks of it with the deepest awe himself, but openly rebukes one of his disciples for treating it otherwise. The disciple had encountered a man who declared that 'God once assumed on earth a human shape,' and, in a fit of righteous indignation, had abused and attacked him. Expecting his master's sympathy, he is told instead,

"Fitlier thou saidst 'I stand appalled before
 Conception unattainable by me,
 Who need it most'—than this—'What? boast he holds
 Conviction where I see conviction's need,
 Alas,—and nothing else? then what remains
 But that I straightway curse, cuff, kick the fool!'"

¹ *The Sun*.

Turning next to the direct statements of belief that occur in some of the poems, we might be inclined to consider them conclusive evidence of Browning's Christianity, if it were not for the emphasis with which he himself repeatedly insists upon the dramatic character of his works. *Christmas Eve*, in particular, is written in the first person, and bears upon its face the stamp of Christian sympathies. Even if, as Mrs Orr suggests, it was due to the influence of the poet's wife, that influence can hardly have taken effect in his work without at the same time operating upon his thought; so that if the hero of the poem is really Browning himself, it is hardly possible to deny that, at all events while he was engaged in writing it, he was a Christian in the ordinary acceptation of the term. In *Fears and Scruples*, which is also written in the first person, there is the same sympathy with the Christian point of view, and though the truth of the Biblical narrative is there treated as an open question, there can be no doubt about the intention of the last line,

"Hush, I pray you !

What if this friend happen to be—God?"

The conclusion of *A Story of Pornic* is even more striking; and, at the same time, there is less reason to suspect it of being dramatic, since the last three verses seem to constitute a kind of appendix, explaining the author's reason for writing the poem :

"The candid incline to surmise of late
That the Christian faith proves false, I find ;
For our Essays-and-Reviews' debate
Begins to tell on the public mind,
And Colenso's words have weight ;

*I still to suppose it true, for my part,
See reasons and reasons¹; this to begin ;
'Tis the faith that launched point-blank her dart
At the head of a lie—taught Original Sin,
The Corruption of Man's Heart²."*

As further evidence of Browning's belief in the gospel story, it should be noticed that he makes the Pope refer to it as a kind of subsidiary proof of the loving nature of God.

It has already been seen that he based his belief in God's infinite power, wisdom and love primarily upon the evidences of his own internal experience. He did not think that the power and wisdom could be seriously doubted, but was well aware that there were grave difficulties to be overcome, before the doctrine of divine love could be considered established. Though there was evidence for it in his own ideal conceptions, of which God was the final cause, the world, of which He was equally the author, afforded no such evidence. On the contrary, the sin and evil prevalent there supplied a strong argument to those who refused to accept the doctrine. The operation of strength and intelligence was apparent enough ;

"but goodness in a like degree?
Not to the human eye in the present state,
An isoscele deficient in the base³!"

For an answer to this view, the Pope turns to the gospels. In the story of the life and death of Jesus the outer revelation of God is reconciled with the poet's ideal of Him, for the eternal truth of divine

¹ The italics are mine.

² *A Story of Pornic.*

³ *The Pope.*

self-sacrifice shines through it, as clearly as the truth of divine power shines through the visible creation.

“What lacks then of perfection fit for God
But just the instance which this tale supplies
Of love without a limit? So is strength,
So is intelligence; let love be so,
Unlimited in its self-sacrifice,
Then is the tale true and God shows complete¹.”

It may, of course, be answered that Christian sentiments in the mouth of the Pope must be discounted in any attempt to discover Browning's own opinions; but though this is no doubt true, it is fair to remember, on the other hand, that Browning's Pope is in some respects far from orthodox. It may also be objected that Browning countenances the idea that 'the tale,' even if not true, may be evidence of love; for Ferishtah answering the contention that man's yearning for a loving man-like God cannot be taken as a proof of His existence, asks

“What if such a tracing were?
If some strange story stood,—*what'er its worth*²,—
That the immensely yearned-for once befell,
—The Sun was flesh once³?—”

But, even granted that this interpretation of the passage is correct, it is so clear that no evidence for anything other than the ideals that men may find within themselves can be afforded by an imaginary narrative, that Browning can hardly be supposed consistently to have held that 'the tale' could be made the basis of an argument about God's nature, if it were really false.

¹ *The Pope.*

² The italics are mine.

³ *The Sun.*

An objector might urge further, that the poet has put into the mouth of St John and the Pope phrases which undoubtedly indicate that the Christian faith will pass away, and that such an opinion, contrary as it would appear to be to the real sentiments of these persons, must represent what Browning himself thought, rather than what he imagined his characters to think. Looking into the future, and comparing the task of ages to come with that of the early church, Pope Innocent asks,

“As we broke up that old faith of the world,
Have we, next age, to break up this the new,—
Faith in the thing grown faith in the report—
Whence need to bravely disbelieve report
Through increased faith i' the thing reports belie,

Correct the portrait by the living face,
Man's God, by God's God in the mind of man¹?”

It is possible to understand this passage in the sense that the Christian story is a mere symbol, through which, for a few centuries, the truth that God is love may be revealed. The doctrine is ‘the thing,’ and ‘the tale’ a report which belies the thing. Thus, it may vanish away and the world lose nothing, just as the poet may depart when his verse is written, if only ‘he leaves in the singer's stead the indubitable song.’ There is a similar passage in *A Death in the Desert*, which may be interpreted to mean that the gospel story serves only as a lamp held up to display the features of God, the relevant question with regard to which is, not ‘Is it true?’ but, ‘Does it reveal His features as it should?’

¹ *The Pope.*

"This imports solely, man should mount on each
New height in view ; the help whereby he mounts,
The ladder-rung his foot has left, may fall,
Since all things suffer change save God the Truth.
Man apprehends Him newly at each stage,
Whereat earth's ladder drops, its service done ;
And nothing shall prove twice what once was proved¹."

A closer enquiry into the context seems, however, to show that the real intention of this passage is to account for the fact that miracles no longer occur; while 'the report' of which the Pope speaks, refers, not to the essence of the Christian story, but to the accumulated mass of church tradition. Consequently, neither of these two passages need affect the conclusion that has been reached as to Browning's view. Equally inconclusive is the argument which Mrs Orr draws from the absence of any reference to the promise made by Jesus from the 'proof' of immortality put forward in *La Saisiaz*. Since Browning does not refer to this promise, it is argued that he cannot have attached any importance to it, and therefore cannot have believed its author to be divine. But a negative inference of this kind can never carry much weight, and in this case becomes quite worthless in view of the strictly philosophic character of *La Saisiaz*, the artistic unity of which would have been destroyed by the introduction of an appeal to authority.

On the whole, the evidence of the poet's writings lends support to the view that, for practical purposes, he accepted the main doctrines of Christianity. In addition to the indications afforded by his poems,

¹ *A Death in the Desert.*

there are two sayings of Browning quoted by Mrs Orr, which tell in the same direction. He was fond of declaring in Charles Lamb's words, "If Shakespeare was to come into the room, we should all rise to meet him, but if that person (meaning Christ) was to come into the room, we should all fall down and try to kiss the hem of His garment"; and again in those of Napoleon, "I am an understander of men, and He was no man¹." Needless to say, these phrases, like the quotations that have been given from his writings, imply no more than that he was a Christian at the time when he gave utterance to them. It is probable that there were many occasions in his life when his faith wavered, but the general attitude of his mind, so long as he confined himself to the practical standpoint, seems to have been one of acquiescence both in the theology and in the fundamental historical doctrines of Christianity.

There is, however, a serious difficulty in the way of accepting the view that has been advanced above. It lies in the fact that the Pope and St John bring the conception of the inadequate and progressive character of all human knowledge, referred to in the previous chapter, into direct contact with the gospel story. The Pope speaks as though he neither knew, nor greatly cared to know, in what sense 'the tale' was true ;

"whether a fact
Absolute, abstract, independent truth,
Historic, not reduced to suit man's mind,—

¹ Mrs Orr, *Life*, p. 318 and footnote.

Or only truth reverberate, changed, made pass
 A spectrum into mind, the narrow eye,—
 The same and not the same, else unconceived—
 Though quite conceivable to the next grade
 Above it in intelligence,—as truth
 Easy to man were blindness to the beast,
 By parity of procedure,—the same truth
 In a new form, but changed in either case :
 What matter so intelligence be filled¹ ? ”

Similarly, when St John is challenged to give a plain answer about the Christian story, to say ‘Was this once, was it not once?’ and ‘tell the whole truth in the proper words,’ he replies that the essential nature of the human mind makes it impossible to do this.

Are we not then confronted with a contradiction? On the one hand, we have been led to believe that Browning accepts both the theology and the history of Christianity, and, on the other, that he is prepared definitely to accept nothing. This difficulty is, however, only a particular case of the fundamental opposition which has already been shown to exist between his metaphysical and his practical outlook. Just as in his doctrine of God, so also in his view of Christianity and of all the problems of philosophy, he takes by turns two positions, first, that of a person who has opinions, and, secondly, that of one examining into the validity of those opinions. From the practical point of view he declares that he does in fact believe certain things, but, on passing to the metaphysical standpoint, candidly confesses that he has no business to do so. Thus, it appears that when he sees fit to

¹ *The Pope.*

don the robe of a metaphysician, he is compelled to regard the Christian doctrines, like all his other beliefs, as 'not proven,' and inadequate; yet, for all practical purposes, the faith which he had contingently accepted became absolute for him¹, and claimed his allegiance both to its theology and to the facts recorded in its sacred books.

¹ Mrs Orr, *Life*, p. 436.

CHAPTER III.

OPTIMISM.

IN the Christian story, Browning found an evidence of God's love, which would, without it, have been lacking in his external experience. But more than this is necessary, if his own inner life bears true witness to the nature of the Cause. It is inconceivable to the poet that a God who is all-strong, all-wise, all-loving, could have made *anything* bad, and he is by no means satisfied with the assurance of Christianity that He made at least one thing good. His goodness must be displayed in every separate part, as well as in the sum total of experience. Thus Browning is brought face to face with the problem of evil, which has to be met somehow or other by every religious thinker. His method of meeting it is to explain away what we call evil, and to affirm, despite appearances to the contrary, that 'God's in His heaven, all's right with the world.'

But before examining his explanation in detail, it is necessary to make explicit the reasoning by which

he attempts to justify his conviction that it is evil, rather than good, that requires explanation. Taking the whole of his experience, perceptual and conceptual together, he finds in it a fundamental contradiction. He apprehends 'the monstrous fact' of evil and yet 'knows the maker of all worlds is good¹.' Within himself he recognizes an ideal of infinite power, intelligence and love, and therefore, since, as he holds, the Cause cannot be less than the Effect, God, who created all things, must surpass, or at least cannot fall short of, this ideal. On the other hand, in the world of external experience, he finds that vast circle of pain and failure and doubt, which has been so eloquently described by Newman; "I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress. The world seems simply to give the lie to that great truth of which my whole being is so full...To consider the world in its length and breadth, its various history, the many races of men, their starts, their fortunes, their mutual alienations, their conflicts; and then their ways, habits, governments, forms of worship; their enterprises, their aimless courses, their random achievements and acquirements, the impotent conclusion of long-standing fact, the tokens so faint and broken of a superintending design, the blind evolution of what turn out to be great powers or truths, the progress of things, as if from unreasoning elements, not towards final causes, the greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain hung

¹ *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon.*

over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruption, the dreary hopeless irreligion, the condition of the whole race so fearfully yet exactly described in the Apostle's words 'having no hope and without God in the world'—all this is a vision to dizzy and appal, and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution¹." There is

"Evil and good irreconcilable,
Above, beneath, about my every side²."

And the mystery is that the Omnipotent Cause, who made all this, must yet be conceived as a kind and loving God. It may well be asked how 'a Cause, all-good, all wise, all-potent' could have mixed 'all the good within our range' with evil, or have granted us nothing better than a

"slow and sure advance
From a knowledge proved in error to acknowledged ignorance³";

or, above all, have been

"Unavailing of bestowment on its creature of an hour,
Man, of so much proper action, rightly aimed and reaching
aim,
So much passion,—no defect there, no excess, but still the
same,—
As what constitutes existence, pure perfection, bright as brief,
For yon worm, man's fellow-creature, on yon happier world,—
its leaf⁴."

¹ *Apologia*, p. 241.

² *La Saïsiaz*.

³ *Francis Furini*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

It is inconceivable to Browning that the God revealed in his ideal can have made the world as he sees it. Therefore, either the witness of his ideal, or the witness of his external experience, must be misleading. But, since both these are parts of his experience, and together make up the whole, it is impossible for him to say which is filled with the spirit of truth, and which with the spirit of falsehood, without transcending that experience. To reconcile two parts of it, he must stand at some point outside it. But this is the very thing that he has already confessed himself unable to do without shattering the whole fabric of knowledge. Therefore all his reasoning from such a standpoint can, as he frankly admits in his later poems, result in nothing more than a surmise. He accepted an optimistic theory of the universe without claiming that any proof of it was possible. "I apprehend," he says, "the monstrous fact" of evil,

"Yet know the maker of all worlds is good,
And yield my reason up, inadequate
To reconcile what yet I do behold¹."

His answer to the school of Schopenhauer was not any ingenious syllogism, but simply the emphatic expression of his own contrary opinion, and the retort, which Professor Ward also makes, that they themselves do not really follow out the logic of their own creed ;

"I live my own life, yours you dare not live²."

Though they believe that 'the will to live is the core of reality, that life itself is evil, and man its most

¹ *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon.*

² *Bishop Blougram's Apology.*

conspicuous phenomenon,' they nevertheless continue to enjoy the existence they so unreservedly condemn, and refrain from taking the obvious means of leaving it.

Browning, on the other hand, in the strength of his optimistic faith, mere surmise though he admits it to be, can face boldly and consistently every difficulty that may arise; 'earth is not grey but rosy'; 'a sun will pierce the thickest cloud earth ever stretched': he is

"One who never turned his back but marched breast-forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamt, though right were worsted, wrong would
triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake¹."

This faith, as already indicated, is not a certainty but a hope, and Browning refrains from any attempt to demonstrate its truth. He does, however, try to make out some justification for his position by putting forward the plea that evil is at all events easier to explain away than good.

"Earth's good proves good,
Incontrovertibly worth loving²,"

but evil is less real. For he knows of nothing so completely evil, that it can be neither accounted for, nor shown to serve any good purpose.

"Of absolute, and irretrievable
And all-subduing black—black's soul of black,
Beyond white's power to disintensify,—
Of that I saw no sample³."

¹ *Epilogue to Asolando.*

² *Reverie.*

³ *A Beanstripe.*

Pain can be seen to promote a good end, either in the sufferer's own life, or in the lives of others; and moral evil is obviously only partial, since the very consciousness of it implies a criterion or principle of good within us, in virtue of which we are able to condemn our actual life¹, and to display that 'self-vindicating flash,' which 'illustrates every man and woman of our mass².'

But this justification, however well calculated to appeal to the heart, has no weight with reason, since, on the one hand, if it is legitimate to explain away evil by calling it illusory, it is quite impossible for 'black's soul of black' to be displayed; and on the other hand, precisely the same method might be employed, with equal success, by anyone who wished to explain away good.

Must it then be said that the poet's whole theory is nothing more than the arbitrary opinion of a single individual, unsupported by a shred of argument? Such a conclusion would, in his opinion, be false, because, although an optimistic faith is confessedly incapable of establishing itself in the eyes of reason, it can be established in the eyes of *man* by the sudden flash of some divine inspiration. In an atmosphere of profound emotion, to 'the accepted eye, at the rare season, for the happy moment³,' fuller and more perfect truth may be revealed than the unaided intellect could ever grasp; for

¹ Cp. J. Caird, *Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, II. 75.

² *Fifine at the Fair*.

³ *Ibid.*

"Ah! yet, when all is thought and said
 The heart still overrules the head;
 Still what we hope we must believe,
 And what is given us receive¹."

In this way an avenue may be opened up, through which access to God can be obtained though the door of reason be shut; and however hard it may be for philosopher or sage to draw near to Him in knowledge, the humblest and most unlearned may clasp His feet in love. "Consider well," the poet even writes,

"Were Reason all thy faculty, then God
 Must be ignored; love gains Him at first leap²."

Browning's creed does not address itself primarily to the intellect, but, like St John, he urges that 'men should for love's sake, in love's strength, believe.' By this he can hardly mean that it is possible to love God, without in any sense apprehending Him, or that a bare emotion is capable of yielding a knowledge of His nature. His contention seems rather to be that when the emotions are stirred the veil is so far lifted from our eyes that we can see more clearly the truth that God is always ready to reveal. At such rare moments of close communion, Rabbi Ben Ezra can declare,

"I see the whole design,
 I, who saw power, see now love perfect too:
 Perfect I call Thy plan:
 Thanks that I was a man!
 Maker, remake, complete,—I trust what Thou shalt do³."

¹ *Through a Glass Darkly*. Clough.

² *A Death in the Desert*.

³ *Rabbi Ben Ezra*.

All the cumbrous apparatus of reasoning can then be thrown aside, for earth grows suddenly like Heaven, and the poet, seeing God face to face, exclaims,

“I truly am, at last!
 For a veil is rent between
 Me and the truth which passed
 Fitful, half-guessed, half-seen,
 Grasped at—not gained, held fast¹.”

Experiences such as this exalt his creed to a higher dignity than that of mere opinion, and, though they can yield no proof of optimism for anyone else, are conclusive enough for him. Thus his surmise is not simply a philosophical proposition to be judged by pure reason, but, as it were, ‘a chemical compound of intellectual and emotional conviction,’ the irrefragable certainty of one who has ‘tasted and seen how gracious the Lord is.’

¹ *Reverie.*

CHAPTER IV.

IMMORTALITY.

IT has been seen that Browning found the witness which his inner experience bore to the nature of God flatly contradicted by the evidence of the outside world; and that, being thus compelled to choose between two alternatives, he deliberately pronounced for 'the sunnier side of doubt.' But he was not content with merely rejecting the conclusions which seemed logically to follow from the testimony of his external experience. He endeavoured to show, by penetrating more deeply into the heart of things, that the apparent contradiction was really no contradiction at all. The first step towards the explanation he desired is contained in the proposition that it is impossible to deduce God's nature rightly from His work in the world of men, because the destiny He has allotted to them is not meant to be realized in this life. Starting with the existence of an all-strong, all-wise and all-loving God, he endeavours to prove the doctrine of a future life by pointing to the incompleteness of the present one. Infinite wisdom

united with Omnipotence cannot make anything imperfect; but man in his earthly life is imperfect; therefore that life can only be a part of a scheme which is as yet unrevealed in its entirety;

"I search but cannot see

What purpose serves the soul that strives, or world it tries
Conclusions with, unless the fruit of victories
Stay one and all stored-up and guaranteed its own
For ever!¹"

If it be answered that, for all we know, the life of humanity as a whole, in its gradual development towards an as yet unconceived end, may be perfect in itself, without the need of a future life for individuals, Browning would rejoin that in the temple which God builds, not merely the edifice itself, but every separate stone composing it, must be without spot or blemish; for He is not subject to human limitations, and need not sacrifice the part to the whole. Consequently, Browning believed that if the individual's earthly life can be shown to be incomplete, the existence of Heaven is proved; and, this being his view, it is natural to find him eagerly advancing instances of intellectual, and even of moral, failure.

Man's life on earth is incomplete because it contains an explicit contradiction between his conception of what he is and of what he ought to be. His distinctive mark is the possession of an ideal in the light of which he can always condemn his actual condition. The disparity between actual and ideal is never removed on earth, since, however steadily the man advances, his ideal continually recedes before

¹ *Fifine at the Fair.*

him; and in this he may esteem himself fortunate, since otherwise there would be no more reason for predicating immortality of him, than there is for predicating it of the beasts which perish.

The very completeness of 'the lower and unconscious forms of life,' whose ideal and whose actual state, whose reach and whose grasp, are identical, is a witness to their mortality. Since they are 'finished' they are also 'finite clods,' whose destiny is death. From the heights of his divine discontent, man can despise their transient perfection.

"Let the mere star-fish in his vault
Crawl in a wash of weed indeed,
Rose-jacynth to the finger-tips.
He, whole in body and soul, outstrips
Man found with either in default.
But what's whole can increase no more,
Is dwarfed, and dies, since here's its sphere¹."

"Poor vaunt of life indeed,
Were man but formed to feed
On joy, to solely seek and find and feast!
Such feasting ended, then
As sure an end to men!
Irks care the crop-full bird? frets doubt the maw-crammed
beast?²"

Nor need we be distressed to find ourselves dwarfed
beside the exquisite proportions and matchless beauty
of sculptured Grecian gods;

"Are they perfect of lineament, perfect of stature?
In both of such lower types are we
Precisely because of our wider nature;
For time, theirs—ours for eternity.

¹ *Dis aliter visum.*

² *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*

To-day's brief passion limits their range ;

It seethes with the morrow for us and more.

They are perfect—how else? they shall never change ;

We are faulty—why not? we have time in store.

The Artificer's hand is not arrested

With us ; we are rough-hewn, nowise polished :

They stand for our copy, and, once invested

With all they can teach, we shall see them abolished.

'Tis a life-long toil till our lump be leaven—

The better ! What's come to perfection perishes.

Things learned on earth, we shall practise in Heaven :

Works done least rapidly, Art most cherishes¹."

Man's glory is that he finds within himself 'the silent prophecy of a future which makes satisfaction with the present for ever impossible²,' for

"What is his failure here but a triumph's evidence

For the fulness of the days³?"

The 'heavenly crowning grace,' which the world could never yield, will, at the last, burst full upon him ; the unrealizable ideal which was of old 'his art's despair' will rise up the fit bride for his soul ; and his spirit, chained down to earth no longer, will soar, with expanded wings, through the splendour of its native element⁴.

In addition, however, to the argument that the All-strong and All-wise cannot be conceived as making anything imperfect, and that therefore a perfect life must be in store for man behind the veil, there is

¹ *Old Pictures in Florence.*

² Caird, *Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, II. p. 29.

³ *Abt Vogler.*

⁴ Cp. *James Lee's Wife* and *Solomon and Balkis.*

another equally powerful one to be drawn from God's love.

"He, the Eternal, first and last,
 Who, in His power has so surpassed
 All man conceives of what is might,

 Would never, (my soul understood)
 With power to work all love desires,
 Bestow e'en less than man requires!¹"

Since He is omnipotent, He cannot fail in anything that He wills, and since He is all-loving it is equally inconceivable that He should will to give to man less than man himself would give to his friends.

"Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man,
 And dare doubt He alone shall not help him, who yet alone
 can?"

.
 And doth it not enter my mind, (as my warm tears attest),
 These good things being given, to go on and give one more,
 the best?

Ay, to save, and redeem and restore him, maintain at the
 height

This perfection—succeed with life's dayspring death's minute
 of night?

Interfere at the difficult minute, snatch Saul, the mistake,
 Saul the failure, the ruin, he seems now,—and bid him awake
 From the dream, the probation, the prelude, to find himself set
 Clear and safe, in new light and new life,—a new harmony yet
 To be run and continued and ended—who knows?—or endure!
 The man taught enough by life's dream, of the rest to make
 sure;

By the pain-throb triumphantly winning intensified bliss,
 And the next world's reward and repose. by the struggles in
 this²."

¹ *Christmas Eve.*

² *Saul.*

The conclusion that the spirit survives the body seems to follow inevitably from the premises Browning has chosen ; but not content with this, he blends with his arguments, and reinforces them by, a powerful appeal to the emotions, which might influence those by whom his premises would be rejected. Such an appeal runs through David's exultant outburst ; it is apparent in *Pauline*, where faith is finally confirmed by the loving thought that

"one so pure as thou
Could never die¹";

and it is the key-note of *Any Wife to any Husband*, in which bodily death is ignored, and love's eyes see that

"the soul
Whence the love comes, all ravage leaves that whole ;
Vainly the flesh fades, soul makes all things new²."

While every dead friend's memory is smiling 'Am I the dust within my tomb?', love refuses to believe in the final extinction of the beloved, and adds the weight of an unreasoned but unconquerable hope to the colder arguments of philosophy. It was human love that inspired *Prospice*, and that enabled Pompilia to see beyond the grave ;

"O lover of my life, O soldier saint,
No work begun shall ever pause for death !
Love will be helpful to me more and more
I' the coming course, the new path I must tread—
My weak hand in thy strong hand, strong for that³."

It has, indeed, been suggested⁴ that the belief in

¹. *Pauline*.

² *Any Wife to any Husband*.

³ *Pompilia*.

⁴ Mrs Orr, *Life*, p. 320.

reunion with those whom death has separated from us was not strongly held by Browning. But in the face of his works it is impossible to accept this opinion. It is true that his belief is a hope rather than a certainty, and that he proclaims it, not with loud-voiced confidence in the market-place, but rather

“with bent head and beseeching hand—
That still, despite the distance and the dark,
What was, again may be ; some interchange
Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,
Some benediction anciently thy smile¹.”

But then his whole theory is no more than this—a mere surmise,—and though, as Mrs Orr says, he does not definitely put forward a plea for reunion in the ‘proof’ of immortality which he gives in *La Saisiaz*, yet it is by the hope of reunion with a particular person that the whole poem is prompted, as is indeed distinctly avowed in the initial question,

“Whether from this life I pass into a better, there
Where that lady lives of whom enamoured was my soul, where
This other lady, my companion dear and true, she also is².”

Thus the hope that we shall see and know our friends in heaven, is not only intimately bound up with Browning’s belief in a future life, but perhaps does more than anything else to make this belief interesting to him. It supplies the motive for his most careful enquiry into the problem of immortality, and fortifies the arguments with which he defends his belief, by enlisting the whole strength of man’s emotional nature in their support.

¹ *The Ring and the Book.*

² *La Saisiaz.*

CHAPTER V.

GOD'S END FOR MAN.

BROWNING'S doctrine of a future life is incompatible with the belief that man's end is attained on earth. This life is a stage through which he is passing towards God's ideal of him, and it will not be possible to argue from his condition to the character of his creator, until that ideal is realized. To say that God cannot be righteous because the earthly life which he has given to man falls short of what men would desire, is as illogical as to judge the capabilities of an artist upon the evidence of the rough outline of some half-finished sketch. Thus Browning has to reconcile his intuitive knowledge of God with the existence, not of man as he is, but of man as he will eventually become. Accepting the witness of his inner experience as conclusive, he has to construct in idea such a heaven as an all-strong, all-wise, all-loving Cause could make. This can only be a state of absolute perfection, when 'all we have willed or hoped or dreamt of good, shall exist, not its semblance, but itself¹.' When

¹ *Abt Vogler.*

God's end for humanity is achieved, there will no longer be any disparity between man's ideal of himself and his actual state. Pleasure and duty will cease to clash, for he will have reached

"the ultimate, angel's law,
Indulging every instinct of the soul,
There where law, life, joy, impulse are one thing¹."

The ragged edges of this life will be rounded off, evil will no longer be necessary for the evolution of good, but a 'further good conceivable beyond the utmost earth can realize' will be made manifest in all things;

"What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more ;

On earth the broken arcs ; in the heaven a perfect round²."

'In that high sphere, to which yearnings tend' every wrong shall be righted, and every difficulty explained. The prophetic anticipation of its coming brings comfort even to Ixion, as he is whirled in agony upon the wheel, till, looking up from the depths of hell, he sees 'pain and despair's murk mists blend in a rainbow of hope.' It is the consolation of all who have grieved for change, or faltered before the hard truth, that 'e'en though better follow good must pass,' as 'silently the first gift dies away³.' For impossible though it be to conceive perfection adequately, and weak as is the symbolism, alike of the aged Apostle with his golden streets and gates of pearl, and of our own more cultured time, we may at least be certain that God's end for us cannot be worse than the best

¹ *Death in the Desert.*

² *Abt Vogler.*

³ *Luria.*

that we can imagine for ourselves; and in the strength of this certainty may put away all despondency and home-sickness for the things of earth, and, with Gerard de Lairese, express

"Heart's satisfaction that the Past indeed
Is past, gives way before life's best and last,
The all-including Future."

Further than this, however, the poet cannot go. His knowledge of his own future state is limited in precisely the same way as his knowledge of God. He cannot say what it is, but only the least that it can be. When it is reached his actual condition will be identical with his ideal of himself, but this ideal is continually receding, and he cannot believe that he has as yet grasped it in its entirety. His present conception of his destiny is therefore, strictly speaking, provisional, but, as in the case of his conception of God, it is treated as absolute for all practical purposes. There is, further, one point in connection with it which does not seem liable to be affected by any new development of his ideal. God cannot have intended any other end for man than the perfection fitted for a self-conscious being. But such perfection is realized in God himself, and anything less than God must be condemned as imperfect in comparison with that ultimate standard. Consequently, to become even as God is must be the final destiny of man, and the goal towards which both the individual and the race are tending. Thus, Paracelsus declares that

"in completed man begins anew
A tendency to God¹."

¹ *Paracelsus.*

Rabbi Ben Ezra speaks of man as 'a God though in the germ'; while the Pope, looking forward to his final state, sees him

"Creative and self-sacrificing too,
And thus eventually God-like (ay
'I have said ye are Gods'; shall it be said for nought?)"

In *Fifne* the doctrine that the spirit shall return unto God that gave it, the finite being merged once more in the infinite spirit to which it is akin and from which it sprang, is put forward in more philosophical language ;

"The individual soul works through the shows of sense,
(Which, ever proving false, still promise to be true)
Up to an outer soul as individual too;
And, through the fleeting, lives to die into the fixed,
And reach at length 'God, man, or both together mixed'²."

The narrow limits of the individual self will at last be left behind, and the process of our life will culminate 'in the identification of thought, feeling, volition, action, of our very soul and being, with the thought and life of Him, of whom all other life is only the partial and imperfect manifestation'. This union is, however, conceived by Browning in a very mystical sense, and does not imply the extinction of separate personality. We are not destined to become identical with God, but 'to become like Him, because we shall see Him as He is,' living in Him indeed, but at the same time living our

¹ *The Pope.*

² *Fifne at the Fair.*

³ Caird, *Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, p. 65.

own separate lives, and conscious of Him as something other than ourselves. Thus Browning does not believe that the goal of human life is to be found in absorption into the divine, but rather that it consists in the complete realization of man's ideal of himself. This involves the fulfilment of all capacities and the satisfaction of all yearnings, for the poet cannot 'doubt that God's power can fill the heart that his power expands.' In his earlier works the powers which he expects to see realized include those of the head as well as those of the heart. In *Paracelsus* love merely claims equality with, and not supremacy over, intelligence. Love, knowledge and power mingled in due proportions make up his ideal man. In *Sordello* the exclusive pursuit of power is condemned, in *Paracelsus* that of knowledge and in *Aprile* that of love. But this trinity reduces itself immediately to a duality, since the intelligence, as it becomes 'knowing,' becomes at the same time powerful, or, in other words, attains to power through the acquirement of knowledge. *Paracelsus* started as a worshipper of intelligence, believing himself commissioned by God to know.

"the secret of the world,
Of man, and man's true purpose, path and fate."

Knowledge was to be its own reward; it was to be pursued without help from the sages of antiquity, and without regard either to the praise of the world, or to the approval of particular persons. Festus, however, through whom the poet speaks, rebuked this aim as one-sided, for he held that man was a being made to love as well as to know, and condemned 'a

course, which from the first produces carelessness of human love.' Paracelsus failed, but Aprile failed no less conspicuously, since, in his yearning 'to love infinitely and be loved,' he had concentrated himself exclusively upon the end, and had neglected to know the means. Paracelsus pondering over their parallel failures sees that our loving and knowing faculties are alike gifts of God and destined for development. He and Aprile are 'halves of a dis-severed world,' that, once united, must never part, for each is necessary to the completion of the other, and the end of man can only be attained by their blending. Summing up the whole matter (in a passage in which the word 'power' is used to indicate the development of the knowing faculty), he declares,

"love's undoing
Taught me the worth of love in man's estate,
And what proportion love should hold with power,
In his right constitution ; love preceding
Power, and with much power, always much more love ;
Love still too straitened in his present means,
And earnest for new power to set love free¹."

The same idea is apparent in *A Death in the Desert*, where man is regarded as possessing a capacity for knowledge, which must be gradually developed in just the same way as his capacity for love. In the later poems a more sceptical attitude is adopted towards the possibility of valid knowledge on earth, but it is still maintained that 'next life helps to learn.' The poet begins to deny that 'now we know in part,'

¹ *Paracelsus.*

but still believes that 'then we shall know even as we are known.' It is true that he speaks in some passages as though the faculty of love were man's only endowment ;

"Friend, quoth Ferishtah, all I seem to know
Is—I know nothing save that love I can
Boundlessly, endlessly¹."

But though he insists again and again upon the transcendent importance of love, he recognizes also that no love is possible without knowledge. To the question 'Why live except for love?' the Pope adds, 'How love unless they know?' The complete realization of love implies, not only the existence of a perfect object, but also a perfect knowledge of it. Love is, however, essentially a greater thing than knowledge, as will be made plain when a heavenly object is set before it ; thus

"In their elements,
My love outsoars my reason ; but since love
Perforce receives its object from this earth,
While Reason wanders chainless, the few truths
Caught from its wanderings have sufficed to quell
Love chained below ; then what were love set free,
Which, with the object it demands, would pass
Reason, companioning the seraphim²?"

Though for a few rare and rapturous moments human love may seem so divine that the only heaven we wish for is a repetition of life on earth, the soul's full capacity for love cannot be permanently evoked by any human object ; 'the perfect oneness of life with

¹ *A Pillar at Sebzevar.*

² *Pauline.*

life, spirit with spirit, is never to be attained in the relation of one finite being to another¹;

"Only I discern
Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn²."

The only adequate object is the all-great and all-loving God, so that man's end consists in the out-pouring of love and praise to Him³.

¹ Caird, *Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, II. 163.

² *Two in a Campagna*.

³ The suggestion in the *Parable of the Sun*, that man's love might be fully realized without the presence of any object at all, is made, not from Browning's 'provisional' point of view, but from that purely abstract standpoint whose adoption he declared to be destructive of the whole fabric of knowledge.

CHAPTER VI.

PROGRESS.

GOD'S purpose for man is not at present attained, but is in process of attainment. The course of evolution is therefore more than a series of mere mechanical changes, for it is working towards a divinely appointed end, and gradually realizing an ideal that lives in God. Progress of this kind is apparent both in the world-process, and in the individual life. Just as many ages have gone to the making of man, and yet humanity still falls far short of what it is destined to become, so also the progress of the body and mind of individual men is slow and gradual. As far as the body is concerned everyone recognizes that this is natural and proper enough, but, as Bernard de Mandeville points out, people are less ready to admit that mind is subject to the same law. Nevertheless it has no more right to expect a sudden and full disclosure of truth than the body has to hope to dispense

“With infancy’s probation, straight begin

To stand full-statured in magnificence¹.”

¹ *Paracelsus.*

The creation of such 'sudden marvel, piece of perfectness' would be contrary to the whole course of God's operations, as far as they are known to us. But, in addition to this, it would be incompatible with the peculiar nature of man, whose earthly task is to reach where he cannot grasp¹, and the very essence of whose being is consciousness of failure². For while he partakes with everything known in progress towards God's ideal, his distinctive mark is that with him that progress is conscious; and that while the lower creation is moulded by the pressure of external forces, his character is largely fashioned by the spirit which works within him, and paints upon the canvas of his brain a picture of the man that he is not, but ought to be. The Power through whom all things exist "takes him into complete partnership with it, and treats him as its confidant. Its force was on the planet; its feeling in the animal; its thought is in man....And so he becomes 'a law unto himself'; not that he *makes* the law, or can repeal it, but that he has within himself the resources for recognizing it and for obeying it, and may consciously and freely cooperate with that appointed order by which other natures are swept along without their leave³." Everything is 'purposed to grow not stop⁴'; of everything it might be said,

"Nor yet on thee
 Shall burst the future as successive zones
 Of several wonder open on some spirit,
 Flying secure and glad from Heaven to Heaven⁵."

¹ Cp. *Andrea del Sarto*.

² Cp. *Rephan*.

³ Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, p. 40.

⁴ *A Death in the Desert*.

⁵ *Paracelsus*.

But only in man arise

"August anticipations, symbols, types
Of a dim splendour ever on before
In that eternal circle life pursues¹."

For he alone is conscious of a work of God in him, to conformity with which he can direct his will. What he is destined to become is partly revealed in his highest ideal of himself, and is gradually realized through his own efforts. Strivings and yearnings after a better than the actual are the inevitable accompaniments of his development.

"Love, hope, fear, faith,—these make humanity,
These are its sign and note and character²."

For they are implied in the fact that man's progress is brought about by the alluring of an ideal, which he recognizes before him, and which continually tempts him to pursuit.

The existence of such an ideal in every man is regarded by Browning as an indisputable fact of psychology ;

"To each who lives must be a certain fruit
Of having lived in his degree,—a stage
Earlier or later in men's pilgrimage
To stop at; and to this the spirits tend,
Who, still discovering beauty without end,
Amass the scintillations, make one star,
—Something unlike them, self-sustained, afar,—
And meanwhile nurse the dream of being blessed
By winning it to notice, and invest
Their souls with alien glory³."

¹ *Paracelsus*.

² *Ibid*.

³ *Sordello*. It is not implied that the meaning taken above is the whole meaning of the passage.

Man's progress towards his 'end' is of a two-fold character, for not only does he move forward towards his own ideal of himself, but that also advances. The ideal end for man, as it exists in the mind of God, is only gradually being revealed to him, so that every height he attains to discloses a higher yet behind it;

"We climb, life's view is not at once disclosed
To creatures caught up, on the summit left,
Heaven plain above them, yet of wings bereft;
But lower laid as at the mountain's foot¹."

We press on towards a phantom light that for ever flies before us, bidding us aspire, but not suffering us to attain; or perhaps we should rather say that the goal of our journey is, as it were, a to-morrow that never comes, or the last of all the lamps upon a winding road, where each appears the last until the traveller draws near it, and sees another coming into view.

We pass therefore, not merely from what seems bad to what seems good, but also 'from what once seemed good, to what now seems best²,' not merely, that is, from what we are, towards what we think we ought to be, but also from what we once thought we ought to be towards a more recent ideal of ourselves. It is thus necessary to know two things before different men can be compared³ with one another,

¹ *Sordello*.

² *A Death in the Desert*.

³ Browning can, of course, only make such a comparison by treating his own 'provisional' ideal as absolutely valid.

first, what their respective ideals are, and secondly how far they live up to them in will. The thing aimed at, and the accuracy of the aim have both to be taken into account in estimating a man's character. When speaking from the point of view of individual ethics, Browning lays his whole stress upon the latter, since in problems of conduct it is impossible for any man to go behind his own ideal of right. But from the universal point of view, the thing aimed at is at least equally important. Thus, in *A Grammarian's Funeral*, a noble failure in the pursuit of a high ideal is exalted far above the successful attainment of a lower one ;

"That low man seeks a little thing to do,
 Sees it and does it ;
 This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
 Dies ere he knows it ;
 That low man goes on adding one to one,
 His hundred's soon hit ;
 This high man, aiming at a million,
 Misses an unit.
 That, has the world here—should he need the next,
 Let the world mind him !
 This, throws himself on God, and unperplexed
 Seeking shall find him¹."

Thus while Browning, the ethical teacher, steadily asserts that our whole duty is to do what we think we ought to do, and that 'ignorance which sins is safe,' Browning, the metaphysician, maintains that ignorance of moral truth is bad, or in the more picturesque language of the heroine of the 'Inn Album,' that 'ignorance is not innocence, but sin.'

¹ *A Grammarian's Funeral.*

Nor is there any inconsistency in thought between these two positions; for by 'goodness,' in the first instance, is meant an approximation of our actual conduct to our ideal of what it ought to be, while in the second is meant the approximation of this ideal to the pattern that exists in God's mind. Further, since mankind is not complete, but is in process of being made, one man cannot be said to be better or worse than another in any absolute sense. Such terms simply signify that the two have reached different stages in their progress towards God's end for them, and are used

"According to what stage in the process turned their rough,
Even as I looked, to smooth!¹"

Man progresses in this double way, not only throughout his earthly life, but also beyond the grave; God's end for him is not realized the moment his body dies, nor is there any breach of continuity in his existence, or sudden change from imperfection to perfection. It is true that Browning expresses various views upon this subject in different parts of his works. In a piece entitled *Speculation*, and in the Lyric following Ferishtah's parable of the *Two Camels*, it is suggested that the only difference death will make will be to substitute permanent for transient pleasures, without any reference to progress at all. In *Old Pictures in Florence*, on the other hand, the idea expressed is that when the schooling of life is over,

"Why, the child grown man, you break the rod,
The uses of labour are surely done;
There remaineth a rest for the people of God²."

¹ *Fifine at the Fair.*

² *Old Pictures in Florence.*

But the general trend of the poet's teaching is that progress will continue from height to height in other lives¹. There are worlds to be traversed not a few, there is much to learn and much to forget²; there will be many adventures strange and new to encounter³. It is sometimes even suggested that the goal will never be reached, but that progress itself is eternal. Fortified with the gains of earth, the soul goes forth 'conquering and to conquer, through all eternity, that's battle without end⁴.' Elsewhere there is a vague suggestion that progress and achievement are somehow mysteriously blended in man's final state;

"I suppose Heaven is, through Eternity,
The equalizing, ever and anon,
In momentary rapture, great with small,
Omniscience with Intelligency, God
With man,—the thunder-glow from pole to pole
Abolishing, a blissful moment-space,
Great cloud alike and small cloud, in one fire—
As sure to ebb as sure again to flow
When the new receptivity deserves
The new completion. There's the heaven for me⁵."

Whatever the precise meaning of this difficult passage may be, it at all events implies that when man's end is realized, it will still be in a state of 'being realized,' or in other words that when he *is* perfect, he will still be becoming so. It is not easy to reconcile this view of the ultimate heaven with that which Browning derives from his conception of the nature of God.

¹ Cp. *One word more*.

³ Cp. *Rabbi Ben Ezra*.

⁵ *Prince Hohenstiel Schwangau*.

² Cp. *Evelyn Hope*.

⁴ *Fifine at the Fair*.

But though it appears to contradict his general attitude, it at least serves to indicate his opinion that man's progress will by no means be confined to this life, and that his goal is still far off.

It is, however, naturally impossible for him to say much about the progress that takes place on the other side of the grave. What he wants to do is to show that everything that is seen and known contributes to the progress that is made here, so that whether man with 'his narrow mind' call it evil or good, it really serves God's purpose, and is consonant with His nature. The whole of our experience being simply an instrument for promoting the development of the soul, it is absurd to exalt any event within experience above the consciousness which contains it, and but for which its existence would not be possible at all. Thus it was a false thought of Eglamor's that

"man shrinks to nought
If matched with symbols of immensity;
Must quail, forsooth, before a quiet sky
Or sea, too little for their quietude¹."

On the contrary, 'the unutterable power of the ocean' and the majesty of the visible world shrink into insignificance beside their master, man;

"Ocean's self shall dry, turn dew-drop in respect
Of all-triumphant fire, matter with intellect
Once fairly matched²."

For the same reason, the pseudo-scientific monism which would make mind the collateral product of

¹ *Sordello*.

² *Fifine at the Fair*.

molecular motions, and would discover 'how brain secretes dog's soul'¹ by vivisection, is self-contradictory and absurd. In the words of Professor Ward, "To regard mind as the collateral product of its own external perceptions is simply to invert the facts. One might as well say that reflections produce their own mirror, or that houses evolve architects²." If it were not that there is an universal consciousness which is above all things, and for which all things exist, man himself might justly claim to be the creator of the world;

"If indeed no mage
Opened my eyes and worked a miracle,
Then let the stars thank me who apprehend
That such a one is white, such other blue!
But for my apprehension both were blank³."

Browning accepts Kant's dictum that 'the understanding makes nature,' and also his doctrine of 'things in themselves' about which nothing can be known;

"Cause before, effect behind me—blanks! The midway point
I am,
Caused itself—itself efficient; in that narrow space must cram
All experience—out of which there crowds conjecture manifold,
But, as knowledge, this comes only,—things may be as I behold,
Or may not be, but without me and above me, things there
are⁴."

To these 'things in themselves' Browning seems to hold, with Kant, that man is in no way related, a

¹ *Tray*.

² *Naturalism and Agnosticism*, Vol. II. p. 106.

³ *A Beanstriepe*.

⁴ *La Saisiaz*.

tenet which modern idealism is inclined to condemn as self-contradictory, but for which authoritative support might once have been claimed. He is, however, quite clear upon the point,—and this is all that is important for our present purpose,—that the actual world of man's experience depends for its very existence upon the relating power of his consciousness, is therefore altogether subordinate to him, and should be approved or condemned according to the way in which it seems to promote his end. Its sole purpose is to 'try him and turn him forth sufficiently impressed' for the perfect service of God. Thus he writes

"I count life just a stuff
To try the soul's strength on, educe the man¹."

Throughout his works, his stress is on character, 'since in the seeing soul all worth lies²,' or as he puts it elsewhere, 'little else is worth study³.' Thus the importance of events in experience depends upon the effect they have upon the soul, or the indications they afford of its condition. Consequently, it is natural for Lazarus, when restored from the grave and endowed with more than human knowledge, to see things in quite new proportions.

"Discourse to him of prodigious armaments
Assembled to besiege his city now,
And of the passing of a mule with gourds—
'Tis one! Then take it on the other side,
Speak of some trifling fact,—he will gaze rapt
With stupor at its very littleness,

¹ *In a Balcony.*

² *Fifine at the Fair.*

³ *Preface to Sordello.*

(Far as I see) as if in that indeed
 He caught prodigious import, whole results ;

 Should his child sicken unto death,—why look
 For scarce abatement of his cheerfulness,
 Or pretermission of the daily craft !
 While a word, gesture, glance from that same child
 At play, or in the school, or laid asleep,
 Will startle him to an agony of fear,
 Exasperation, just as like¹."

Similarly Tiburzio, though the general of Pisa's forces, regards the success or failure of his city, in its struggle with Florence, as an utterly insignificant affair compared with the vindication of Luria's honour, because, as he believes, the example of such rectitude as his, would avail, if it were acknowledged, for the moulding of many lives.

Browning however, as he himself sees, is involved in something very much like a self-contradiction, when he suggests that the whole of experience exists only for the purpose of promoting the progress of man in general, because this view, if stated precisely, contains the proposition that other men exist merely in order to develop his soul, and at the same time asserts that he exists merely to develop theirs. It is impossible to maintain that experience is nothing more than the subjective product of altogether unknown 'things in themselves,' if, in the same breath, the existence of other conscious beings is recognized as a fact. Consequently Browning is driven for the moment into a kind of agnostic solipsism ;

¹ *An Epistle.*

"Son, trust me,—this I know and only this—
 I am in motion, and all things beside
 That circle round my passage through their midst,—
 Motionless, these are, as regarding me :
 —Which means, myself I solely recognise.
 They too may recognise themselves, not me,
 For aught I know or care : but plain they serve
 This, if no other purpose—stuff to try
 And test my power upon of raying light
 And lending hue to all things as I go
 Moonlike through vapour¹."

Temporarily abandoning the attempt to understand the world as a whole, he thinks that the apparent contradiction between the witness of his internal and external experience may be reconciled, if he assumes

"earth to be a pupil's place,
 And life, time,—with all their chances, changes,—just probation-space,
 Mine for me²."

He passes in review the different things that are commonly called evil, such as pain, failure and uncertainty, and exhibits their usefulness as instruments for helping his soul on towards the end God has purposed for it. From this point of view he considers them solely as events within his own experience, without reference to the real existence of other conscious beings. His environment is examined, and sentence passed upon it, as though it was nothing more than

"a machine for teaching love and hate and hope and fear,
 To himself the sole existence, single truth mid falsehood³."

¹ *A Beanstripe.*

² *La Saisiaz.*

³ *Ibid.*

As already indicated, the end which this machine has to serve is the evolution of his moral qualities. According to the view taken in *A Death in the Desert* it serves to develop his faculty of knowledge also, but in the later poems this idea is abandoned, and it is held that such knowledge as he seems to possess on earth is absolutely worthless, and in no way leads up to that complete knowledge which will be suddenly flashed upon him in Heaven. This being so, it becomes necessary for him to explain what good purpose is effected by the fruitless search for truth which he is continually impelled to make.

He points out that the yearning which he feels for truth carries an irresistible conviction to his mind that it somehow really exists, and will at last be found¹. "Knowledge means," says Ferishtah,

"Ever renewed assurance by defeat
That victory is somehow still to reach²."

"Truth builds upon the sands,
Though stationed on a rock; and so her work decays,
And so she builds afresh with like result. Nought stays
But just the fact that Truth not only is, but fain
Would have men know she needs must be, by each so plain
Attempt to visibly inhabit where they dwell³."

The more firmly this conviction is established, the more useful the pursuit of knowledge becomes to the soul, because it gives it the fuller exercise. The thing attained by the struggle is of no value, but 'the prize is in the process.' It is, in fact, the search

¹ Such conviction may be strengthened, but not originated by the enthusiasm of the search. It must exist in some degree before the search can be undertaken at all.

² *A Pillar at Sebsevar.*

³ *Fifine at the Fair.*

after truth and not the attainment of it that helps the soul forward on the journey towards its end. "Plato has profoundly defined man as 'the hunter of truth'; for in this chase, as in others, the pursuit is all in all, the success comparatively nothing. 'Did the Almighty,' says Lessing, 'holding in His right hand truth and in His left search after truth, deign to proffer me the one I might prefer, in all humility but without hesitation I should request search after truth¹.'" The chase being the supremely important thing, the existence of doubts and difficulties is at once explained and justified, for their absence would imply, if not that the ideal was already attained, at least that active pursuit was unnecessary. This view is illustrated by Browning in several connections. In the first place, it is used to account for the existence of uncertainty as to the revelation of God's love in Christ. It is for his own good that man is refused

"what modicum of help
Had stopped the after-doubt, impossible
I' the face of truth—truth absolute, uniform²."

Pope Innocent agrees with St John that 'duly, daily, must provision be, for keeping the soul's prowess possible³,' and therefore, instead of regarding doubt with astonishment and horror, can say

"Nor do I much perplex me with aught hard,
Dubious in the transmitting of the tale,—
No, nor with certain riddles set to solve.
This life is training and a passage; pass⁴!"

¹ Sir W. Hamilton, *Philosophy of Perception*, p. 39: quoted by Masterman, *Tennyson as a Religious Teacher*, p. 173.

² *A Death in the Desert*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *The Pope*.

For the same reason he is undisturbed by the disbelief of others ;

“Neither does this astonish at the end,
That whereas I can so receive and trust,
Other men, made with hearts and souls the same,
Reject and disbelieve,—subordinate
The future to the present,—sin, nor fear.
This I refer still to the foremost fact,
Life is probation, and the earth no goal,
But starting-point of man¹.”

Not only does he account for uncertainty and doubt in this way ; but goes further, and shows, from the experience of his own time, how religious certainty may stunt the soul's growth. For he finds that many of those who have received Christianity, who have ‘found, and known and named’ it, recognizing its beauty and its value, nevertheless live less worthy lives than the great men who died before it came. The Archbishop of Florence, that dignitary of the Church who refused to help Pompilia in her need, and ‘the Monastery called of Convertites,’ which attempted to dishonour her memory and plunder her child, ill bear comparison with the old pagan poet Euripides, who in that ‘tenebrific time, five hundred years ere Paul spoke, Felix heard,’ found reason for so much of temperance and righteousness, and attained so nearly to guess at that Paul knew. He passed before the coming of the sunrise, which, joining truth to truth, ‘shoots life and substance into death and void,’ yet though the skies were dark above him, he found a better path, and followed it more faithfully than many high-placed Christians, ‘who miss

¹ *The Pope.*

the plain way in the blaze of noon.' It is the too easy assurance with which Christianity is accepted that enervates the moral fibre of its adherents. They have no longer any battles to fight, any Nero to brave, any doubts to overcome, and therefore they sink into a state of moral lethargy. There is no longer any fear of 'sudden Roman faces, violent hands,' such as set up a barrier to St John; the days have passed when 'imminent was the outcry, Save our Christ;' nor has the critic yet begun to ask, 'Was John at all, and did he say he saw?'

"Is it not this ignoble confidence,
Cowardly hardihood, that dulls and damps,
Makes the old heroism impossible¹?"

After this condemnation of his own time, the Pope sees, as it were in a vision, that the mission of the coming age will be

"to shake
This torpor of assurance from our creed,
Reintroduce the doubt discarded, bring
That formidable danger back, we drove
Long ago to the distance and the dark²,"

till doubt once more awakes the sleeping soul, rouses it to renewed activity,

"And man stand out again, pale, resolute,
Prepared to die,—which means, alive at last³."

For, in Carlyle's words, 'the dead letter of Religion must own itself dead, and drop piecemeal into dust, if the living Spirit of Religion, freed from this its charnel-house, is to arise on us, new-born of Heaven, and with new healing in its wings⁴.'

¹ *The Pope.* ² *Ibid.* ³ *Ibid.* ⁴ *Sartor Resartus*, p. 80.

For a kindred reason, it is undesirable that the existence of a future life should be certainly known. In this case, however, it is not pursuit of truth, but pursuit of good, that the soul would be deprived of, if a complete revelation were accorded it. If it were certain that a more glorious existence would inevitably follow the death of the body, suicide would be at once natural and wise, for

"Who would fardels bear
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
That undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will?"

If, again, it were further known that suicide was forbidden under penalties, it would indeed be reasonable to go on living, but only in the laziest and pleasantest way possible. Finally, if it were revealed that man's future state would depend upon his conduct here, he would no longer have any freedom of choice between good and evil, but would be forced by self-interest to choose the former. 'Therefore neither good nor evil does man, doing what he must,' for it would be impossible for him to see the better and choose the worse, unless he really disbelieved

"In the heart of him, that edict which for truth his head received¹."

As the bond-slave of the moral ideal, he would no longer be able to engage in that active and voluntary pursuit of it which constitutes his true good. Consequently in these—and the same is true of all other—

¹ *La Saisiaz.*

matters of religion, certainty would be injurious to man. It is well for him that faith should be shot through with doubt, 'since the growing religious intelligence walks best by receding light¹,' and in this way best obtains the exercise it needs.

"You must mix some uncertainty
With faith, if you would have faith be²."

"Pure faith indeed—You know not what you ask!
Naked belief in God the Omnipotent,
Omniscient, Omnipresent, sears too much
The sense of conscious creatures to be borne.
It were the seeing him, no flesh shall dare.
Some think Creation's meant to show him forth;
I say it's meant to hide him all it can,
And that's what all the blessed evil's for³."

The existence of religious uncertainty leaves men free to choose between good and evil; but in order that the former may be actively pursued it is essential for the latter to be presented as a possible alternative. Such pursuit presupposes not only that certain things are regarded as good, but also that certain others are looked upon as evil. Unless we were conscious of strife, hate and ignorance, it would be impossible to struggle after peace, love and knowledge⁴, because our ideal would not differ at all from our actual state. If we did not recognize evil, neither could we recognize good⁵, but everything would be neutral.

¹ A saying of Browning's quoted by Mrs Orr, *Life*, p. 135.

² *Easter-day*.

³ *Bishop Blougram's Apology*.

⁴ *Fifine at the Fair*.

⁵ In opposition to Browning's view it might be held that we could quite well recognize nothing but different degrees of good, as of pleasure. He himself seems to see this in *A Soul's Tragedy*, where

'Knowledge can but be of good by knowledge of good's opposite';

"Type needs antitype ;
As night needs day, as shine needs shade, so good
Needs evil¹."

It might even be said that 'every growth of good springs consequent on evil's neighbourhood,' since the one could not be conceived of, except in contradistinction from the other. Therefore, for the purpose of man's development,

"though wrong were right,
Could we but know—still wrong must needs seem wrong
To do right's service, prove men weak or strong,
Choosers of evil or of good²."

Whether evil really exists or not, it is absolutely essential for man to believe that it does, since the whole business of his life is 'just the terrible choice' between it and good. The stronger its solicitations become, the greater is the effort needed to resist them; so that the pursuit of good is especially active and useful for developing the soul, when it is undertaken in the face of violent temptation.

"Was the trial sore?
Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time!
Why comes temptation but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
And so be pedestaled in triumph³?"

Ogniben, putting Chiapino's position, says, 'I desire to be able, with a quickened eyesight, to descry beauty in corruption where others see foulness only; but I hope I shall also continue to see a redoubled beauty in the higher forms of matter, where already everybody sees no foulness at all.'

¹ *Francis Furini.*

² *Ibid.*

³ *The Pope.*

Since, then, it is necessary that man should be confronted with what he considers evil, in order that he may progress towards his end, it cannot be said that the existence of this evil is inconsistent with the nature of an all-loving God, but

“this life proves a wine-press,—blends
Evil and good, both fruits of Paradise¹;

or, in the slightly varied language of St John,

“As I saw the sin and death, even so
See I the need yet transiency of both,
The good and glory consummated thence².”

Hope and fear, faith and doubt, good and evil, are not foes, but fast friends engaged in the common work of promoting the development of the soul; for whether upon the side of morality or of knowledge, it is impossible for a man to struggle forward unless he is conscious of a good or a truth which he has not yet attained, and which must therefore be distinguished from the bad or false of daily life. All apparent obstacles to moral and intellectual progress are in reality helpful to us, since ‘the low nature’ is made ‘better by our throes,’ in the struggle to surmount them. Instead of despairing, therefore,

“We garland us, we mount from earth to Heaven,
Just because exist what once we estimated
Hindrances, which better taught, are helps, we now confess³.”

The excellence of moral struggle is often dwelt upon

¹ *Jochanan Hakkadosh.*

² *A Death in the Desert.*

³ *Fifine at the Fair.*

in the poet's works ; the warrior Husain exults in it ; Paracelsus reflects that

"Twere little praise
Did full resources wait on our good-will.
At every turn¹;"

Sordello sees that without the necessity for it there could be none of the 'old faith, old courage, only born because of harms'; nor, adds Prince Hohenstiel, would there be anywhere displayed that

"pity, courage, hope,
Fear, sorrow, joy, *devotedness in short*,
Which I account the ultimate in man²."

In this phrase Browning's fundamental position is at last clearly brought out. It must have occurred long ago to anyone reading these pages, that struggle in the active pursuit of an ideal has been somewhat easily assumed by the poet to be the purpose of man's life on earth. He has written about it as though there were no difficulty in identifying it with progress towards his end. But since this end, so far as the earthly life can promote it, has been seen to consist in the full development of his capacity for love, it looks at first sight as though moral and intellectual struggle has nothing whatever to do with it. This difficulty is, however, removed by a consideration of Prince Hohenstiel's reference to 'devotedness.' The active pursuit of ideals is valuable simply because it implies love of them. The stronger the temptation to forsake them, the more ardent love becomes in reaction against it. Thus the chase of truth and

¹ *Paracelsus*.

² *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. The italics are mine.

of the moral ideal are really forms of love, so that everything which contributes to make such pursuit possible, as the existence of doubt and moral evil have been shown to do, contributes to man's progress towards an infinite development of his love, and serves therefore as a means for bringing about the end, which God has destined for him.

Having displayed the uses of ignorance and evil in general, Browning proceeds to consider the more particular question of pain. It serves the same purpose of exercising his soul in love in a more direct way. His own pain and the pain of others which appears in his experience, both contribute to this end, the one by making the evolution of love possible under the form of gratitude, and the other by evolving it immediately in the form of pity.

"Put pain from out the world, what room were left
For thanks to God, for love to man!?"

On the one hand

"Why thanks—

Except for some escape, whate'er the style,
From pain that might be, name it as thou mayst?"

For unless pain were recognized in the world, a state of pleasure would appear the only possible state and could not therefore evoke gratitude³. As things are, however, the fact that pain exists as a known alternative enables us to recognize love shining through the gift of pleasures. Pain and pleasure, therefore,

¹ *Michrab Shah.*

² *Ibid.*

³ But pleasant feeling is a positive thing which can exist without any correlative pain; gratitude might be evoked by different degrees of it, or even by a constant pleasurable state. Cp. Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*.

together make the love of God manifest to us, in a way that pleasure alone could not do; and the extreme importance of this revelation is brought out in the words of St John,

“Our life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear,—believe the aged friend,—
Is just our chance o’ the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is¹.”

It is desirable for man to learn this simply because the realization of it tends to develop his own soul in love. Though perfect knowledge is necessary before this love can attain to its full heavenly development, yet for the training and practice which earth affords, it is sufficient for man to ‘know of’ the God who guards and blesses him, without knowing him through and through.

“Enough to say, ‘I feel
Love’s sure effect, and being loved, must love
The love its cause behind—I can and do’².”

The second purpose that pain serves is to develop love under the head of sympathy and pity. Save for it, love could not be called forth towards mankind in general, but only towards the few who are bound to us by close ties; for

“Who sympathizes with their general joy,
Foolish as undeserved³?”

It was through their misfortunes, and not through any happiness or success, that the multitude had a claim upon Sordello’s service;

¹ *A Death in the Desert.*

² *A Pillar at Sebzevar.*

³ *Michrab Shah.*

"Whence rose their claim but still
From Ill as fruit of Ill? What else could knit
You theirs but sorrow¹?"

Pain, for which no reason is apparent, is the most powerful incentive to active sympathy that there is, for 'how can man love but what he yearns to help?'

Therefore, even though it were not really true that others suffer pain, the poet sees that it is for his good that he should think they do :

"How were pity understood
Unless by pain? Make evident that pain
Permissibly masks pleasure—you abstain
From outstretch of the finger-tip that saves
A drowning fly²."

Thus everything that we are accustomed to condemn in our experience is shown to be a means for promoting progress towards perfect love, which is the end that God has purposed for us. It is the only means by which this purpose could be achieved, and is therefore completely justified. The lesson to be learnt on earth is simply that of love : here it is ours

"To suffer, did pangs bring the loved one bliss,
Wring knowledge from ignorance,—just for this—
To add one drop to a love-abyss³."

Once 'taught to mould the living vase' of a Christ-like character, we can afford to forget the cracked pitchers, that our clumsy hands have spoiled in the course of our apprenticeship. For, as Bishop Blougram declares, the love we have learnt is the only thing that matters ;

¹ *Sordello*.

² *Francis Furini*.

³ *Rephan*.

"It is the idea, the feeling and the love
 God means mankind should strive for, and show forth,
 Whatever be the process to that end!¹"

Consequently, the existence of 'this dread machinery of sin and sorrow' upon earth is justified by the plea that there is no other way in which it would be possible 'to evolve the moral qualities of man,' 'to make him love in turn and be beloved'.²

The exercise of love is at once practice for, and partial attainment of man's end. Even here it 'forces earth teach heaven's employ,' and for a moment, 'lets us pent-up creatures through, into eternity our due'; so that while 'the prize is in the process' to the seeker after knowledge, love, in a sense, 'is victory, the prize itself.' But the chief function of such love as is possible for man on earth is to train him for the perfect exercise of love in Heaven. It may, indeed, be denied that the selfish passion for a single human being can in any sense be said to train men for that supremely unselfish love. Browning's answer is, however, easily found in an appeal to evolution. A love like that of Porphyria's murderer is a poor thing, but it marks a stage in a process. The least and dullest spark of love, even if it be rooted and grounded in sin, has a worth in it of which no admixture of selfishness can rob it;

"Neither shalt thou be troubled over much
 Because thy offering,—littleness itself,—
 Is lessened by admixture sad and strange,

¹ *Bishop Blougram's Apology.*

² *The Pope.*

³ *Dis aliter visum.*

Of mere man's-motives—praise with fear, and love
With looking after that same love's reward¹."

The reason for this is that the perfect love of heaven is gradually evolved by the practice of inferior forms of it on earth. It is like 'a fire, that kindling its first embers in the narrow nook of a private bosom, caught from a wandering spark out of another heart, glows and enlarges until it warms and beams upon multitudes of men and women, upon the universal heart of all, and so lights up the world and all nature with its generous flames².'

"Lo, link by link, expands
The circle, lengthens out the chain, till one embrace
Of high with low is found uniting the whole race³."

In the words of Plato, the soul progresses by 'rising from the love of one to the love of two, and from the love of two to the love of all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair deeds, and from fair deeds to fair thoughts, till from fair thoughts it reaches on to the thought of the Uncreated loveliness, and at last knows what true beauty is⁴.' Thus the exercise of imperfect love on earth leads the soul on to the perfect love of God, which is its end.

"Love which, on earth, amid all the shows of it,
Has ever been seen the sole good of life in it,
The love, ever growing there, spite of the strife in it,
Shall arise, made perfect, from death's repose of it⁵."

¹ *Cherries*.

² *Emerson*; quoted by Professor Jones, p. 148.

³ *Fine at the Fair*.

⁴ Plato, *Symposium*; quoted by Masterman, *Tennyson as a religious teacher*, p. 135.

⁵ *Christmas Eve*.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ILLUSORY CHARACTER OF EVIL.

IN the last chapter it has been shown that according to Browning's view all that is commonly designated as evil serves to promote God's end for man. But this is not sufficient to reconcile its existence with his conception of the nature of God. For if the evil that is present in earthly experience could have been avoided, and the end attained without it, God is not all-loving ; whereas, if it was unavoidable, He is not Omnipotent. Hitherto Browning seems to have tacitly inclined towards the second of the two horns of this dilemma. His attitude towards pain and evil has been that of one striving to demonstrate their necessity for the development of his soul. He has, indeed, admitted that the real existence of pain for others cannot be satisfactorily explained in this way, but only its apparent existence within his experience. He has propounded the indignant question,

"Can we love but on condition, that the thing we love must die?

Needs there groan a world in anguish just to teach us sympathy¹?"

¹ *La Saisiaz.*

and has been driven to the desperate expedient of suggesting that his experience has no connection with external reality, but that for every mortal—if indeed mortals other than himself exist at all—there is ‘his own world.’

But he has to account for his own pain as well as for that of others, and it is impossible to put this aside as merely apparent. For since pleasure and pain exist for him only as apprehended, to say that they are apprehended amiss is unmeaning. His own state of feeling is the one thing about which it is absolutely impossible for him to have any doubt;

“I know my own appointed patch i’ the world,
What pleasures me or pains there¹.”

The most utter scepticism, which will only reluctantly grant that ‘knowledge may be at the most²,’ is no bar to the certain assurance of pain and pleasure;

“I myself am what I know not—ignorance which proves no bar
To the knowledge that I am, and since I am, can recognize
What to me is pain and pleasure; this is sure, the rest—
surmise³.”

Driven to recognize the reality of pain as far as he is concerned, he nevertheless refuses to predicate absolute reality of it. Contrasting the brief minute of this life with the everlasting destiny of man, he holds that the experiences which the soul undergoes in the course of its development may be treated as illusory in contrast to the reality of the soul itself.

¹ *A Beanstripe.*

² *A Pillar at Sebzevar.*

³ *La Saisiaz.*

Thus Pompilia points to the transience of evil in the words

"I know I wake, but from what?—blank, I say;
This is the note of evil, for good lasts¹":

and Rabbi Ben Ezra adds to this an assertion of the unreality of all transient things;

"Fool, all that is at all
Lasts ever past recall,
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure²!"

But, in spite of a certain confusion which appears to exist in Browning's mind upon this matter, he does not in general believe that the problem of evil can be solved by arbitrarily defining the real as the everlasting. By emphasizing the vastness of Time's expanse it is possible, indeed, to suggest that the part played by evil is comparatively insignificant, but it is not possible to dismiss it altogether in the way that Browning's conception of an all-perfect God requires. He is therefore driven to regard reality as eternal and timeless rather than everlasting. Time is a 'mode of man' and not of God, so that events in time, though real for man, are unreal for His absolute vision. It is not enough to say that a thousand years in His sight are as a single day, for, since He is outside time altogether, the temporal divisions of days and years have no meaning at all in connection with Him. From this standpoint not only transient existence but even everlasting existence is divorced from reality. Thus pleasure and pain are both ultimately unreal, though it is only the latter that

¹ *Pompilia.*

² *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*

Browning cares to prove so. Absolute reality cannot be predicated of any event in experience, but only of the effect it may leave in the soul, which is eternal as well as everlasting. When our end is achieved and the spell of illusion is broken by bodily death, God's point of view will become ours also. Now

"Man's fancy makes the fault!
Man, with the narrow mind, would cram inside
His finite, God's Infinitude¹."

But then

"We shall start up at last, awake
From life, that insane dream we take
For waking now, because it seems²."

Enabled to 'look through the sign to the thing signified,' we shall see everything swept away into nothingness, save only the perfect soul of man as it ever lives in God's ideal of him. Even in this life there are moments when we understand

"How evil—did mind descry
Power's object to end pursued,
Were haply a cloud across
Good's orb, no orb itself³,"

and how to perfect knowledge

"Evil proves good, wrong right, obscurity explained,
And howling childishness⁴."

At such a moment, standing beneath Guercino's picture at Florence, and praying for the angel's benediction, the poet dreams of the wonderful results that would follow the touch of that divine hand;

¹ *Bernard de Mandeville.*

³ *Reverie.*

² *Easter Day.*

⁴ *Fifine at the Fair.*

"I think how I should view the earth and skies
 And sea, when once again my brow was bared
 After thy healing, with such different eyes.
 O world as God has made it! All is beauty,
 And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.
 What further may be sought for or desired?¹"

After such enlightenment, we should see things as God sees them in their absolute reality, and not disfigured by the baneful shadows cast by Time, and we should know that

"The world's no blot for us,
 No blank; it means intensely and means good²."

"I but open my eyes,—and perfection, no more and no less,
 In the kind I imagined, full-fronts me, and God is seen God,
 In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the clod³."

He is seen manifested, nay dwelling in all visible things. "God is the perfect poet," says Aprile, "who in His person acts His own creations." There is a memory of Wordsworth's famous lines in the words of Paracelsus,

"He dwells in all,
 From life's minute beginnings, up at last
 To man—the consummation of this scheme
 Of being, the completion of this sphere
 Of life⁴."

The same idea runs through *Fifine*, and in *Christmas Eve* receives such full expression, that, were it not for the evidence of his other works, the poet might almost be considered the upholder of a pantheistic view of the universe ;

¹ *The Guardian Angel.*

³ *Saul.*

² *Fra Lippo Lippi.*

⁴ *Paracelsus.*

“And I shall behold thee face to face,
O God, and in thy light retrace
How in all I loved here still wast thou¹.”

From the absolute point of view, that which is above Time and eternal is the only reality; evil is illusory in that it is transient; and therefore the true condition of the world outside the poet is in complete accord with the nature of God, as revealed in the highest ideal he can conceive.

¹ *Christmas Eve.*

CHAPTER VIII.

ETHICS.

BROWNING'S view of Time also serves, as will appear in the sequel, to reconcile his speculative with his ethical philosophy. But before any system of ethics can even be propounded, it is first necessary to define man's relation to God in such a way as to leave him in some degree a free agent. It would be futile to argue that he ought to do or be certain things, if he were a mere conscious automaton without any power over his volitions. Browning recognises, indeed, that his freedom is more narrowly limited than the ordinary man supposes it to be ;

"Love, we are in God's hand.
How strange now, looks the life He makes us lead ;
So free we seem, so fettered fast we are !
I feel He laid the fether, let it lie¹."

Nevertheless there is a certain definite sphere within which he is free to take his own decisions ;

¹ *Andrea del Sarto.*

"You know what I mean, God's all, man's nought:
 But also, God, whose pleasure brought
 Man into being, stands away
 As it were a hand-breadth off, to give
 Room for the newly made to live,
 And look at him from a place apart,
 And use his gifts of brain and heart,
 Given, indeed, but to keep for ever.

Man therefore stands on his own stock
 Of love and power as a pin-point rock¹."

He has an individuality of his own, is himself
 'efficient' in his degree and no mere puppet in
 almighty hands. As the *Saviour of Society* declares,

"I,—not He—
 Live, think, do human work here—no machine,
 His will moves, but a being by myself,
 His, and not He, who made me for a work,
 Watches my working, judges its effect,
 But does not interpose²."

Not only is he free in the sense of being unconstrained by God, but also in the sense of being able, if he so chooses, to resist his own pleasure-seeking desires. He is not an inert mass, chained, as Bentham believed, to the irresistible power of imagined pain and pleasure, to be dragged helplessly about in their train. Browning makes his protest against this psychological hedonism in *Luria*, where the political schemer Braccio asserts that 'man seeks his own good at the whole world's cost,' but the hero, by his life and death, affords a striking proof of the falsity of this proposition. In the parable entitled *Plot-*

¹ *Christmas Eve*.

² *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*.

Culture, Browning's view on the whole question of man's free will is concisely summed up ;

“Thou wouldst not stained
Distinctly man,’—Ferishtah made reply,
‘Not the mere creature,—did no limit-line
Round thee about, apportion thee thy place
Clean-cut from out and off the illimitable,—
Minuteness severed from immensity.
All of thee for the Maker,—for thyself,
Workings inside the circle that evolve
Thine all,—the product of thy cultured plot¹.”

But if the recognition of free will is an essential preliminary to the enunciation of any ethical precepts, the recognition of the reality of evil is no less necessary.

Browning, however, as was shown in the last chapter, undoubtedly believed that evil was illusory. God's purpose, he held, is always attained whatever men may do or say ; He comes

“Before and after with a work to do
Which no man helps nor hinders².”

Whatever the fruit of any individual life,

“Be hate that fruit or love that fruit,
It forwards the general deed of man,
And each of the Many helps to recruit
The life of the race, by a general plan ;
Each living his own to boot³.”

Since failure with God is impossible, the more nearly we grasp the whole scheme of things, the more

“quick sense perceives the same
Self-vindicating flash illustrate every man

¹ *Plot-Culture.*

² *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.*

³ *By the Fireside.*

And woman of our mass, and prove, throughout the plan,
No detail but, in place allotted it, was prime
And perfect¹."

According to this view, however, since evil is mere illusion, and nothing but good is real, there can be no reason why man should follow any one course of conduct rather than any other. Everything being for the best, and God's purpose being achieved in any case, there can be no objection to his always doing what is most pleasant to himself. Since the pain of others serves a divine end, it cannot, as Sordello, in one of his moods, argues, be our duty to try to relieve it. Under such circumstances it is impossible to reason out any clear rule of right, for

"One object, viewed diversely, may evince
Beauty and ugliness—this way attract,
That way repel,—why gloze upon the fact?
Why must a single of the sides be right²?"

Nor is this the only difficulty which the acceptance of an optimistic faith puts in the way of establishing an ethical system. For it seems to indicate, not merely that the moral law is undiscoverable, but that it is actually non-existent. Human activity becomes impossible and absurd, since the beneficent purpose of God marches steadily on towards its consummation, sublimely regardless of all human efforts. For men to attempt to change its course by philanthropic or any other schemes is at once impious and futile. It is a matter of complete indifference whether we be selfish or self-sacrificing,

¹ *Fifine at the Fair.*

² *Sordello.*

for a Marcus Aurelius or Francis of Assisi is no more acceptable to God than a Borgia or a Catiline. The harmony of His plan demands the existence of them all, and in each the purpose of His love is fulfilled.

From such a paradox as this there must assuredly be some method of escape; and Browning seems to find it in the view he takes of Time. God's 'purpose of love' is finally fulfilled in all men, even in those who refuse to make use of the moral gymnasium with which they had been provided, and choose hate instead of love throughout their earthly life; but between the good and the bad there is the difference that the course of the former is completed in a shorter time. This view involves the rejection of the doctrine of eternal punishment, a 'dreadful creed' which is treated by Browning with an ironical contempt similar to that which Burns poured upon it in *Holy Willie's Prayer*. He does not expect to stand beside Johannes Agricola, and

"gaze below on hell's fierce bed,
And those its waves of flame oppress,
Swarming in ghastly wretchedness¹,"

but through the mouth of Pompilia and the Pope declares that God's mercy is as unlimited as His power.

"Where will God be absent? In His face
Is light, but in His shadow healing too:
Let Guido touch the shadow and be healed!²"

Beyond the reach of furthest knowledge, he is con-

¹ *Johannes Agricola in meditation.*

² *Pompilia.*

vinced that there exists for the greatest sinner in the world some

“sad obscure sequestered state
Where God unmakes, but to remake the soul
He else made first in vain ; which must not be¹.”

Guido, however, and those like him will not reach the end for which they are destined till many ages have gone by, while Pompilia passes at once to the throne of God. The better a man's earthly life is, the sooner will the gates of heaven be opened to receive him ;

“Whatever end we answer by this life,—
Next time, best chance must be for who, with toil and strife,
Manages now to live most like what he was meant
Become ; since who succeeds so far, 'tis evident,
Stands foremost on the file ; who fails has less to hope
From new promotion².”

And again,

“However near I stand in his regard,
So much the nearer had I stood by steps
Offered the feet which rashly spurned their help.
That I call Hell ; why further punishment³?”

Thus the result of a man's choosing evil is the postponement of his day of blessedness. Since, however, Time is a mode of man and not of God, the fulfilment of God's purpose for him is in no way affected by this fact. There is no yesterday or to-morrow with the Eternal, and no such thing as delay for a Being above and beyond Time. Consequently, the

¹ *The Pope.*

² *Fine at the Fair.*

³ *A Camel-driver.*

purpose that man looks upon as destined for fulfilment is fulfilled already for Him. From the standpoint of God it is true that human distinctions of good and bad are unreal;

"Ill and Well,
Sorrow and Joy, Beauty and Ugliness,
Virtue and Vice, the Larger and the Less,
All qualities, in fine, recorded here,
Might be but modes of Time and this one sphere,
Urgent on these, but not of force to bind
Eternity, as Time—as Matter—Mind¹."

But Browning does not consider this to be any reason for abandoning the attempt to construct a system of ethics. On the contrary, he holds that, in spite of the unreality of evil and of the moral law from the absolute point of view, duty is still a real thing for man. The fact that distinctions between right and wrong melt away in the glow of Eternity does not make them invalid as rules for the guidance of our earthly life, nor contradict our belief that righteousness will be rewarded, and sin punished; for the punishment takes place within the closed circle of Time, and does not effect a purpose which transcends Time. Thus when man declines to follow the moral ideal which God has given him, his destiny is affected from his own point of view but not from God's.

This method of reconciling Optimism and Ethics is not, however, pressed very far by Browning, since it is seen to make duty rest, in the last resort, upon self-interest. But he does not, in consequence of this, abandon either of his positions. On the contrary,

¹ *Sordello*.

'the vigour of his ethical doctrine is as preeminent as his conviction of the absolute sway of the Good¹.' His final solution of this apparent contradiction is not really a solution at all, but an appeal to the weakness of the human intellect. God's entire scheme is so much too vast for our comprehension, that when we try to master and unite its different aspects nothing but confusion and ignorance comes of the attempt. But

"I have one appeal—

I feel, am what I feel, know what I feel;
So much is truth to me²."

"I trust in my own soul, that can perceive
The outward and the inward, nature's good
And God's³."

The voice of conscience is authoritative through the very immediacy of its direction. We know by direct perception what our duty is, and cannot, without contradicting ourselves, doubt that we ought forthwith to perform it; and thus, though theorizing about God's entire scheme leads only to perplexity, we can always fall back upon the rule of right which we find within ourselves. In 'this human clear for that divine concealed⁴' we have a

"solid standing place amid
The wash and welter, whence all doubts are bid
Back to the ledge they break against in foam⁵."

In practical life, of course, the dictates of conscience seem often to apply to external acts, but

¹ Jones, *Browning as a religious and philosophical teacher*, p. 103.

² *Sordello*.

³ *A Soul's Tragedy*.

⁴ *Sordello*.

⁵ *Francis Furini*.

Browning has no interest in these. In his view the supremely important thing is that our wills should be bent in conformity with conscience. As might be expected from his general speculative views, he regards the effect which our volitions produce upon our environment as of no importance whatever. It is for the volition itself that he cares, and not for the results that follow from it. The Utilitarian passes judgment upon a man's action according to the amount of pleasurable or painful feeling which it causes; but Browning, whose attention is concentrated throughout upon the eternal soul, ignores the physical act altogether, and declares, with Kant, that from the point of view of ethics, 'the good-will is the only unconditioned good.'

"'Tis not what man does that exalts him, but what man
would do;
See the King—I would help him, but cannot, the wishes
fall through;
Could I wrestle to raise him from sorrow, grow poor to
enrich,
To fill up his life, starve my own out; I would—knowing
which,
I know that my service is perfect¹."

In the same spirit Andrea del Sarto, recognizing with Ogniben that a man's actual performance is not purely his own, but 'half the world's work, interfere as the world must, with its accidents and circumstances', judges the unsuccessful enthusiasts around him by their aims rather than by their achievements;

¹ *Saul*.

² *A Soul's Tragedy*.

"There burns a truer light of God in them,
 In their vexed, beating, stuffed and stopped-up brain,
 Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
 This low-pulsed, forthright craftsman's hand of mine.
 Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
 Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,
 Enter and take their place there sure enough,
 Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
 My works are nearer Heaven, but I sit here¹."

A great part of Rabbi Ben Ezra's monologue is devoted to setting forth the same position;

"Not on the vulgar mass
 Called work must sentence pass,
 Things done that took the eye and had the price²."

For man's physical acts are only partly under his control; 'to will is present with him, but to do that which he would is not'; so that the 'categorical imperative' of Ethics can only apply to volition, and not to external movements.

Believing, as he does, that everyone recognizes some ideal of good, and finds within himself some ethical precepts as to what he ought to do³, Browning sees that he may either will to do these things, or may deliberately choose evil, or may decline to will at all. The last of these possibilities he regards as infinitely the worst. To compromise in a half-hearted way between God and Mammon is to be classed with him 'who made through cowardice the great refusal,' and for ever languishes in the outer limbo of the Inferno, 'hateful to God and to his enemies⁴'.

¹ *Andrea del Sarto*.

² *Rabbi ben Ezra*.

³ Cp. Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, p. 35.

⁴ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto III.

"Evil or good may be better or worse
In the human heart, but the mixture of each
Is a marvel and a curse¹."

Pietro and Violante, because they did not dare to follow conscience fearlessly, but tried to blind themselves with sophistries and to mingle wrong with right, are dismissed with the Pope's stern sentence,

"Go,
Never again elude the choice of tints,
White shall not neutralize the black, nor good
Compensate ill in man, absolve him so:
Life's business being just the terrible choice²."

Sincerity in striving after *something* is the first requirement of all. 'Let things be, not seem'; 'do and no wise dream³';

"Truth is the strong thing; let man's life be true⁴."

In these and other detached passages, Browning's horror of a life that is merely a process of drift is plainly expressed. It appears, however, even more clearly in such longer poems as *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* and *The Statue and the Bust*. In the former, Miranda gets no sympathy so long as he is hesitating between Clara and 'our Lady of the Ravissante,' but when at last he does something definite, and leaps from the tower to put his faith to the test, Browning takes his side. *The Statue and the Bust* teaches the same lesson in the condemnation passed on the Duke and the lady, not for their immoral intention, but for the 'unlit lamp, and the

¹ *Gold Hair.*

² *Gerard de Lairesse.*

³ *The Pope.*

⁴ *In a Balcony.*

ungirt loin.' So much is it better 'to sin the whole sin' than to be only half in earnest, that Fifiue's honesty in vice is counted unto her for virtue, and even Guido is excused 'somewhat, since hate was thus the truth of him.' This recognition of the superiority of making evil our good to deliberately shutting our eyes and doing nothing is in accordance with Browning's speculative belief that the evolution of love is the one thing that matters, since it is possible, in a sense, to love evil if we deliberately decide to pursue it.

It would, however, be a great mistake to suppose, on the strength of poems like *The Statue and the Bust*, that Browning thinks lightly of deliberate immorality. This is better, it is true, than a state of general cynicism and indifference, but none the less it is itself utterly to be condemned. In order that what we will may correspond to what we know, it is first necessary that we do not refuse to will at all. But to affirm that to fail in this respect is the worst of failures is not to condone such a deliberate choice of evil as is implied in the resolve to make our actions consistently different from the ideal which we recognize as highest. In his *Essay upon Shelley*, Browning speaks upon this matter with no uncertain voice. "A Divine Being has Himself said, that 'a word against the Son of Man shall be forgiven to a man,' while 'a word against the Spirit of God' (*implying a general deliberate preference of perceived evil to perceived good*) shall not be forgiven to a man¹." Choice of evil and indifference may be bad in different degrees,

¹ *Essay on Shelley.*

but nothing is really laudable save a full-hearted choice of good, as we, to the best of our ability, can conceive it. This is what the Pope displays in the momentous case he has to try, when, recognizing all along the possibility of error through the frailty of his faculties, he finds in this no reason for declining to do the best he can with such mental endowments as have been given him, but concludes

"I do

Discern and dare decree in consequence,
Whatever prove the peril of mistake¹."

This also is the part chosen by those 'mighty ones of old' whom Browning's imagination conjures up, 'thronging through the cloud-rift.'

"Was it for mere fools' play, make-believe and mumming,
So we battled it like men, not boy-like sulked and whined?
Each of us heard clang God's 'Come!' and each was coming:
Soldiers all, to forward face, not sneaks to lag behind!"²

To follow conscience thus heartily is still our supreme duty, even though when we step, as it were, outside ourselves, we perceive that the moral ideal is progressive, and that absolute right and wrong are unrealizable here. For man is confined within the boundaries of his own experience, and having to look at life, not from God's point of view, but from his own, cannot but believe that his absolute duty is to will what he thinks is his duty.

"Ask thy lone soul what laws are plain to thee,
Thee, and no other; stand or fall by them!"³

¹ *The Pope.*

² *Epilogue to Ferishtah's Fancies.*

³ *A Camel-driver.*

No matter what we are, whether a Shakespeare, or a Luther, or a Blougram; or what the content of our own particular ideal of objective duty may be, the one 'categorical imperative' upon us all is to walk by the light our inner sense reveals, and not to 'turn aside from following after it.'

"Each favoured person that perceives his path
Pointed him, inch by inch, and looks above
For guidance through the mazes of this world
In what we call its meanest life-career;

.
I say that man is no less tasked than I
To duly take the path appointed him,
By whatsoever sign he recognize
Our insincerity on both our heads¹."

From the purely ethical standpoint to go further than this and to probe into the grounds of duty is clearly impossible. For in matters of practice, when a man is considering whether it is his duty to adopt a particular line of conduct, the form of his thought is not 'Do I think that I ought to do this?' but 'Ought I as a matter of fact to do it?' so that the enquiry why he ought to do what he thinks his duty resolves itself into one as to why he ought to do his duty, that is, why he ought to do what he ought to do, or why is A, A. Thus the dictates of conscience carry the witness to their validity within themselves, and cannot be questioned by anyone under their immediate sway.

The recognition of this fact need not, however, debar the poet from offering a speculative justification

¹ *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.*

for obedience to the dictates of conscience. For when, as an ethicist, he insists upon the ultimate character of moral intuition, he is confining himself to the realm of experience; but when he attempts to harmonize his practical with his speculative views, he is seeking to explain the relation subsisting between experience and reality. From this point of view, the enquiry, 'Why ought I to do what I think my duty?' does not dwindle away into a questioning of the reason for identity, but becomes a demand for an explanation of the fact, the truth of which is not disputed, that he (in reality) ought to do what he (in experience) thinks he ought to do. To such a challenge the poet's answer would be somewhat as follows.

In the pleadings of conscience he finds a direct revelation of the will of God, so that if asked why he ought to do what he thinks he ought to do, he would reply, 'Because my ideal of duty is given me by God, with whom it is self-evident to me that I ought to try to co-operate.' As he meditates upon the incomprehensible Power in whose hand he is, there comes over him an overwhelming sense of his own littleness and of the vanity of all earthly desires. 'That which masters life'¹ reveals itself, and gives its sanction to conscience, so that he sets about his work in the world, not 'for man's sole sake, but God's and therefore man's'.² Thus he does not find in the *psychological* fact of human sympathy that adequate *ethical* sanction into which Utilitarianism

¹ *Sordello*.

² *The Pope*.

erects it, but acts 'not so much with reference to the many below as to the One above him, the supreme intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth¹.' As is implied in the conclusion of one of Ferishtah's lyrics, in which he says

"I looked beyond the world for truth and beauty,
Sought, found and did my duty²,"

his ethical system is not independent, but is based upon a direct relation to, and intercommunication with, God. In following the moral ideal which he recognizes in himself, he is fulfilling the plain duty of endeavouring to co-operate with Him and 'not to thwart at all His purpose in creation.'

Thus, though from the ethical standpoint the categorical imperative is frequently referred to by Browning as though it were entirely unconditioned, from the speculative point of view he harmonizes his attitude towards it with the rest of his system by treating obedience to it as subsidiary to God's end for man. This, as has already been explained, consists in the complete development of his soul in love, so that, in the last resort, love is seen to be the only absolutely independent duty. The deepest ground for obedience to the voice of conscience is that in willing what he believes to be good man is co-operating in the progress which God requires of him; for one of the chief agencies by which his love is called into play is the attractive power of his own ideal of conduct, and the more completely he yields himself up to that power and follows the beckoning

¹ *Essay on Shelley.*

² *A Beanstripe.*

of its viewless hand, the more fully is his capacity for devotion realized and developed.

Hence it follows that love is both the ground for all other duties, and itself the most real duty of all, more fundamental even than obedience to the 'categorical imperative'; so that Browning is able to add to the 'form' of ethical obligation, which he derived from Kant, a substantial content to which he would have the whole world subscribe, in the doctrine that man should send forth love to the utmost of his power. Whether concentrated upon a single individual, or faring 'up and down amid men,' or turning in adoration towards the Father's throne, love is always good. "Be love your light, and trust your guide," the poet cries; "for love is the fulfilling of the law."

CHAPTER IX.

CONCLUSION.

HAVING now examined Browning's religious teaching in some detail, we must attempt a summary of his conclusions. Starting with the intuition involved in his knowledge of his own existence that there is a single Cause of which 'he and all things perceived' are an Effect, he proceeds to maintain that the Effect cannot be greater than the Cause, and that consequently, since he recognizes certain ideals in himself, God's nature must be at least as high as the highest of these. Romanes was led back towards orthodoxy by the very similar reflection that 'the Ultimate Being must be at least as high as the intellectual and spiritual nature of man¹.' Apart, however, from the further difficulty in which Browning is involved when he tries to deduce the nature of a real Being from a thing so different in kind as the ideal which he is said to have created in another Being, even Romanes' less ambitious position is open to the attack of many different schools of philosophy. The difficulties surrounding it become especially great

¹ *Thoughts on Religion*, p. 102.

when it is seen to require, for its support, the assumption that the writers' own judgments of high and low, great and small, are absolutely and finally valid. A consideration of this point leads Browning to admit that on the side of Reason his conclusions must be pronounced 'not proven,' and can claim to be nothing more than surmises. However, they are fortified by an appeal to the emotions, and treated by him, for all practical purposes, as though they were beyond dispute. Thus, by a reference to his own highest ideal, he convinces himself that God is 'all-good, all-wise, all-powerful.' Turning from his 'internal' to his 'external' experience, he has somehow to reconcile the apparently conflicting evidence to be found there with this conclusion. He is driven, by the impossibility of resting in a contradiction, to explain away either evil or good, and, encouraged by emotional fervour, immediately determines to accept the inner rather than the outer witness. Consequently, evidence of an all-loving God has to be discovered in the world around him. The Christian story supplies such evidence 'upon the whole,' but this is not sufficient, since God, as Browning conceives Him, cannot have made any evil at all. Hence it follows that the earthly life does not adequately represent God's purpose for man, but is merely a stage in the progress towards it. This end, for which man is being trained by all the incidents which he is accustomed to condemn in this life, will finally be attained in the perfect fulfilment of all his capacities, the most important of which is the faculty of love. Practice for this is obtained in that active pursuit of an ideal

of truth and goodness, which is only made possible by the existence of ignorance and sin, and in the exercise of gratitude to God and pity for our fellow-men, which depends upon acquaintance with the so-called evil of pain. The existence of evil cannot, however, be reconciled with the nature of an almighty and all-loving God by saying that it is a necessary means towards a good end. Since it is obvious that nothing can be necessary to Omnipotence, it must further be maintained that the evil which promotes God's end for man is in the last resort unreal. It is a transient incident in Time, while the only absolute reality is the eternal soul. But though unreal in this sense, it is real enough from the point of view of man; and thus it is possible for him to control his own destiny so far as it is bounded by Time, without affecting the Creator's purpose for him, which is above and beyond Time. Thus it is possible to maintain at one and the same moment, that 'good rules unchecked along the line,' whatever man may do, and that man will suffer if he declines to do what he thinks right. Browning is not, however, careful to base his ethical system upon self-interest, but rather upon the direct intuitions of conscience, the ultimate ground of whose authority he finds in the fact that obedience to its dictates promotes the development of love in man. But from a practical point of view these dictates require no justification and admit of no appeal. It is impossible for man to transcend his own experience in this or in any other respect, so that whatever his speculative belief may be, he can, by no arguments or sophistical juggling

with words, escape from the conclusion that what he feels in his heart he ought to do, that is duty for him.

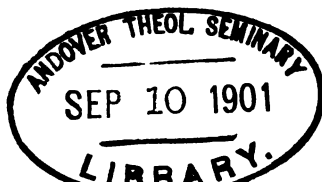
In the foregoing opinions, if they be regarded as a philosophical system, there is much that is unsatisfactory. While it would be irrelevant to the purpose of this essay to examine them from an external standpoint, it is necessary to refer to certain particulars in which they appear to be inconsistent with one another. The chief difficulty seems to lie in the fact that the poet's practical conclusions are contradicted by those at which he arrives from the metaphysical point of view¹. Statements which are in absolute conflict with one another cannot be harmonized by the assertion that they are made from different standpoints, or by the tacit assumption that their author can consistently maintain one thing as a speculative thinker and the opposite as a practical man.

Even within the speculative sphere Browning comes dangerously near to a further contradiction. When reflecting upon human knowledge, he sometimes condemns it altogether as simply 'nescience,' and at other times speaks of it as an approximation indeed towards the truth, but one which falls short to an unknown extent of absolute truth. In the former of these views the contradiction is formal and complete, for if all knowledge is really invalid, it is impossible for anyone to have valid knowledge of this fact; whereas in the latter, the inadequacy and uncertainty which belong to all conclusions cannot

¹ See especially chs. I and II.

but attach to the one in which their limitations are affirmed.

In view of the negative character of his metaphysic, he naturally attempts to separate his practical philosophy from metaphysical considerations; but as a matter of fact it can easily be shown that he does not succeed in doing this. Having abandoned the hope of acquiring 'knowledge' and professed himself content with a surmise, he falls back upon the direct teaching of the ideals, intuitions and perceptions which constitute his experience. Thus, reaching the Christian conception of God from the evidence of his ideals, accepting the gospel narrative of an historical incarnation and crucifixion, and recognizing the ultimate authority of conscience, he attains to a provisional philosophy, which would be well enough if the limits of experience were less wide than they actually are. But, unfortunately, the acknowledgement that men ought to adopt one course of action implies that it is possible for them to adopt another, and therefore that an all-perfect God has left it open to men to sin. Further, the briefest reflection upon experience makes it plain that moral evil is not merely permitted but is abundantly present in the world, while sorrow and pain are also everywhere conspicuous. The evidence of this part of experience thus negates the testimony which the other part has borne to the universal benevolence of God. Consequently, in order to escape from a fundamental contradiction, the poet is compelled, whether he will or no, to transcend experience and revert to those metaphysical considerations which he had previously dismissed upon



the ground that they could lead to nothing but scepticism.

The solution of the problem of evil by which he attempts to escape from some of the contradictions of experience also leaves much to be desired. The confusion existing in his mind between 'eternal' and 'everlasting' might even be said to suggest that, though he frequently discussed, he had never thoroughly considered the question. According to his argument Time is unreal from God's point of view, so that pain and moral evil, being events in Time, can only be real for men. But they must be able to influence man's eternal soul, since they are intended by God to promote the development of its loving faculty. Consequently, Browning's view amounts to this; that God causes unreal events to take place in order that by an unreal (temporal) process they may produce a real effect on a real being. Further, their success or failure in producing the effect intended is a matter of complete indifference to Him, since His purpose will 'eventually' be achieved, if necessary through the operation of some other unreal means which He will employ 'after' the death of the body.

In addition to these perplexities, the poet's theory appears to involve a belief that the Infinite Cause is a Being of more limited grasp in one direction than man himself; for the Deity is so completely outside Time that He is unable to realize temporal differences, while man is not only outside Time and able to realize in himself an eternal good, but also inside it, and capable of appreciating the reality of passing events.

The confusion becomes still worse confounded, when it is remembered that Browning considered it inherent in the divine nature to make an 'everlasting' sacrifice for men; for since an everlasting act is simply one occupying the whole of Time it cannot be real to a Being for whom Time is unreal; and therefore God Himself must be unaware of the suffering which men know Him to undergo.

It would be useless to examine further a system the deficiencies of which are so plain, and indeed the briefest attempt to criticise Browning's view as a system may seem to need some apology. It cannot but appear somewhat ungenerous to have extracted from a number of dramatic poems philosophical doctrines which the poet himself never professed to have definitely formulated, and then to proceed to point out that the connections between them are faulty. But since an attempt has been made throughout this essay to expound Browning's views in as plausible a manner as possible, the writer would lay himself open to misinterpretation if he refrained from expressing his opinion that this plausibility does not extend below the surface.

Whatever may be thought of the validity of the criticisms that have been suggested above, it should be observed that they are applicable only so long as the poet's opinions are regarded as a philosophical system. But a systematic, harmonious view of the universe is not one of the things which poetry can reasonably be expected to provide. Dramatic poetry in particular is invariably a thing of moods; a train of thought is somehow suggested, and worked out through a

series of changing scenes; or a momentary fancy is adorned with metaphor and imaginary; in every case a particular thought is developed, consistently indeed with itself, but probably without much reference to considerations beyond itself. To demand of a poet the deeper consistency of philosophy would be to rob his art of all the beauty that is lent to it by imagination, and thus by converting it into systematic thinking to ruin it as poetry.

Few poets, indeed, could stand the ordeal of an enquiry into the 'religious teaching' of their works so well as Browning. There is hardly one of his views taken singly that would not find ardent advocates. Scattered throughout his works there is, for instance, much that the idealist school, with which he allied himself, could enthusiastically welcome and praise. His emphatic rejection of materialism in the language of poetry would appeal to the popular mind far more than their closely-reasoned and laborious tomes. For one who would study the ethical teaching of Kant in the original, there are hundreds who might be brought to accept the spirit of it by the poet's stirring lines. His doctrine of love may be too much permeated with impulse and emotion, and its terms too vaguely defined, for it to hold sway in the cold citadel of philosophy. But Intuitionist and Utilitarian would both welcome its author as a comrade-in-arms, the one because his method is similar to theirs, and the other because his practical conclusions are the same. The reconciliation which Professor Sidgwick endeavoured to effect, in the realm of theory, between these two ethical schools,

Browning's doctrine of love effects in the sphere of action; for it at once extols the motive, after the manner of the Intuitionists, and tends to bring about that maximum of happiness which is the Utilitarian end. It is the 'imperial chord' that underlies the whole of his work;

"O heart! O blood that freezes, blood that burns!
 Earth's returns
 For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!
 Shut them in,
 With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!
 Love is best¹!"

"This doctrine of love is, in my opinion," says Professor Jones, "the richest vein of pure ore in Browning's poetry²." Shot through and through with emotion as it is, it is yet susceptible of more reasonable defence than the subtleties of his metaphysic. There is profound meaning in the words of Norbert;

"There is no good of life but love—but love!
 What else looks good is some shade flung from love,
 Love gilds it, gives it worth³."

Thus Browning, writing as he does in the atmosphere of the nineteenth century, still finds a resting-place in the teaching of the first, and bows his head before that deeper truth which was recognized and crowned so long ago; "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love⁴."

¹ *Love among the Ruins.*

² *Browning as a Religious and Philosophical Teacher*, p. 161.

³ *In a Balcony.*

⁴ 1 John iv. 7, 8.

APPENDIX.

THE CONTENT OF BROWNING'S ETHICS.

IN the eighth chapter it was shown that except as regards the paramount duty of love, the 'categorical imperative' of Browning's ethics is an universal 'form,' the content of which must be supplied by every individual for himself. To will what is conceived as good is a binding duty for everyone, but conceptions of good will differ, and the poet, when speaking strictly, does not claim that his own conception is valid otherwise than for himself.

"To other men, to each and everyone,
Another law! what likelier? God, perchance,
Grants each new man, by some as new a mode,
Intercommunication with Himself,
Wreaking on finiteness infinitude¹."

But it is impossible for Browning, or anyone else living an active life in the world, to look consistently upon right and wrong as merely subjective. He cannot help judging the conduct of the men he meets in the light of his own ideal of duty, with the result that he continually slips into forms of speech which imply that this ideal is universally valid. It may therefore be worth while to examine its content, although Browning, if pressed, would probably have admitted that this was a matter of no importance to anyone but himself. In brief, then, the poet is a believer

¹ *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.*

in the 'golden mean,' as illustrated by his attitude towards asceticism and social reform. In the region of individual life, he holds that though it is right to press forward steadily 'to the prize of our high calling in Christ Jesus,' it is not necessary to reject the pleasures that God has offered for our refreshment on the way. While fully recognizing, as in *Easter Day*, the danger of excessive devotion to earthly joys, he sees no virtue in renouncing them unnecessarily.

"Climb—

Quit trunk, branch, leaf and flower—reach rest sublime
Where fruitage ripens in the blaze of day¹."

But

"O'erlook, despise, forget, throw flower away,
Intent on progress? No whit, more than stop
Ascent therewith to dally²."

It is true enough that 'stars abound o'erhead,' but the ground also is bright with flowers³. The lesson of Sordello is 'that the mind must not disdain the body, nor the imagination divorce itself from reality, that the spiritual is bound up with the material in our earthly life⁴;

"Let us not always say,
'Spite of this flesh to-day
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!'
As the bird wings and sings,
Let us cry, 'All good things
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul⁵.'"

The idea that bodily pleasures ought to be renounced for our own good, even if no benefit accrues to our fellow-men, is as baneful as it is absurd. Asceticism of this kind is both bad for the world, and displeasing to God. It is bad for the world, because when a man throws away

¹ *Gerard de Lairese.*

² *Ibid.*

³ *Two Poets at Croisie.*

⁴ *Mrs Orr, Handbook.*

⁵ *Rabbi Ben Ezra.*

his bodily health and strength he diminishes his usefulness as a citizen; and it is displeasing to God, because it is an insult to the giver of good gifts, to throw them aside as worthless;

"What imports
Fasting or feasting? Do thy day's work, dare
Refuse no help thereto, since help refused
Is hindrance sought and found¹."

An exactly similar view is taken in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau with regard to social reform. For the ordinary man who has anything to do with the government of a country, the ideal should be to 'do the best with the least change possible.' Every now and then, no doubt, a genius may arise, 'whose master-touch, not so much modifies, as makes anew.' The average man, however, is not made to revolutionize society, but rather to strive for a slow and gradual bettering of the conditions of human life. His method should be quiet and cautious, without any admixture of subversive experiments;

"Touch
The work he may and must, but—reverent
In every fall of the finger-tip²."

The most obvious way in which he can be useful is by alleviating the bodily sufferings of the multitude; for, though it is very true that there are higher things than the satisfaction of animal wants, yet if a man's body is starved, it is impossible to feed his soul;

"Not bread alone,' but bread before all else
For these; the bodily want serve first³."

Thus by the exercise of 'man's natural sympathy with man,'

¹ *Two Camels.*

² *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.*

³ *Ibid.*

and by carefully avoiding 'the falsehood of extremes' in social action, he would endeavour to promote 'the slow and sober uprise all around of the building.'

A like moderation is noticeable in the poet's attitude towards the Churches. In *Christmas Eve* he recognizes that there is a use for all of them, and enters his protest against the cynicism of those intellectually superior persons who are inclined to scoff at uncouth forms of worship ;

"Which hath not taught weak wills how much they can?
Which hath not fallen upon the dry heart like rain?
Which hath not called to weak, self-weary man,
Thou must be born again¹?"

The Church of Rome evokes his sympathy less than any other, principally because of his keen sense of the abuses that may be engendered by the excessive power of the priesthood. In *The Confessional* he illustrates this ; in *Holy Cross Day* he holds up for general reprobation the methods which the Popes used to adopt for the conversion of the Jews ; while in the *Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister* he gives a picture of the immorality and malice which have so frequently been found in the monasteries of celibate orders. Nevertheless he is firmly convinced that there is good in this as in every other Church. Not only are many of his own deepest thoughts on religion put in the mouth of Pope Innocent, but in his Christmas Eve vision, Christ enters, and lingers in St Peter's, just as He had done in the English Dissenting chapel. Browning

"sees the error, but above
The scope of error, sees the love²."

In spite, however, of his full recognition of the merits of all the Churches, he preferred, for his own part, to worship

¹ Matthew Arnold.

² *Christmas Eve*.

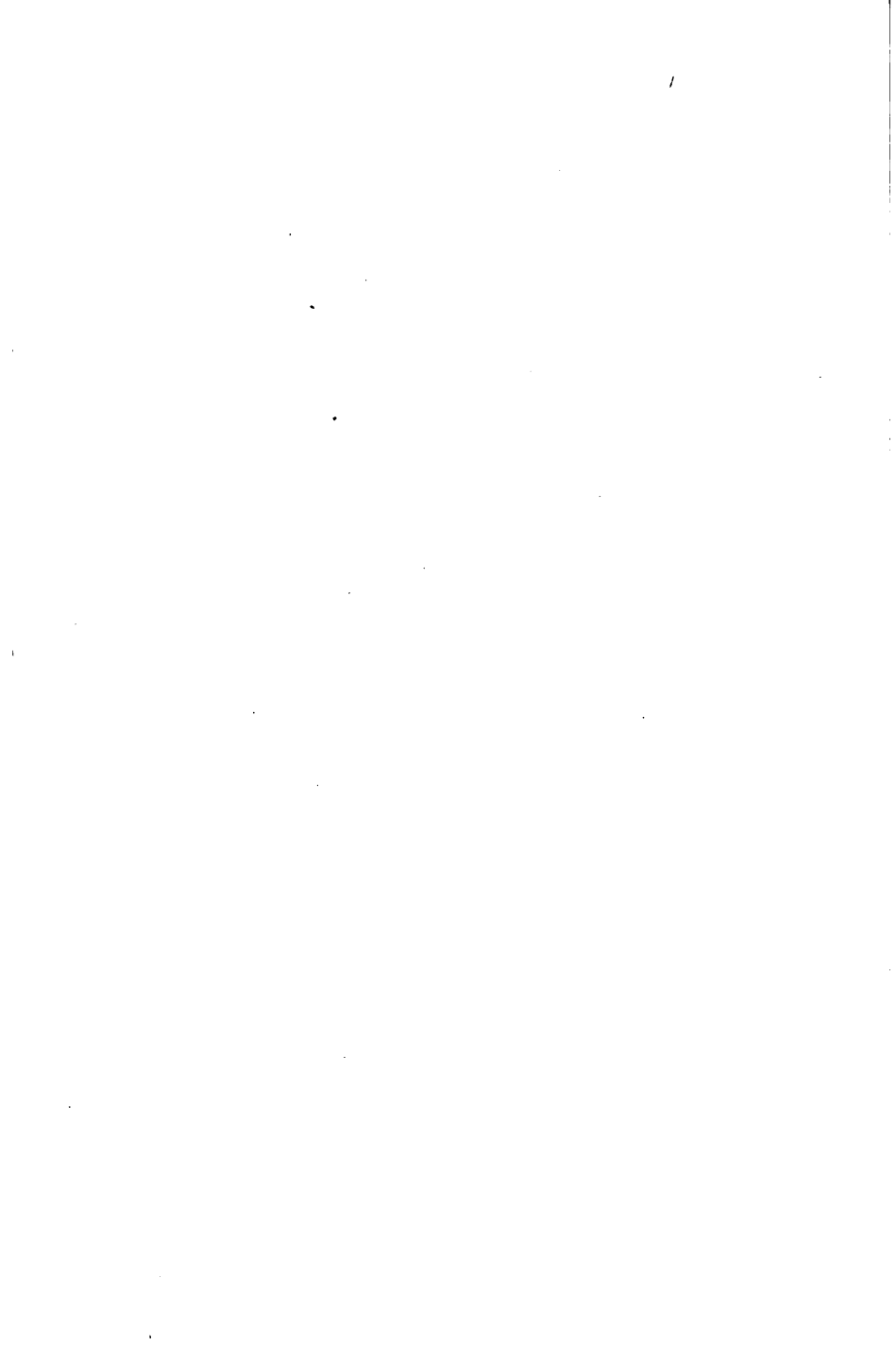
in the temple of nature, rather than in any made with hands, for, as he says,

"Why where's the need of Temple, when the walls
O' the world are that? What use of swells and falls
From Levites' choirs, Priests' cries, and trumpet-calls¹?"

"My heart does best to receive in meekness
That mode of worship, as most to my mind,
Where, earthly aids being cast behind,
His All in All appears serene,
With the thinnest human veil between²."

¹ *Epilogue*. Third Speaker.

² *Christmas Eve*.





DEC 11 '52



3 2044 038 420 964



